MOVEMENTS AND MILITANT MEDIA: COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND LATIN AMERICAN GRASSROOTS POLITICS

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In 1998, four years into their insurgency and surrounded by the larger part of Mexico's military, the Zapatista movement took up a strategy of using video in documenting and communicating their struggle. With support from the Chiapas Media Project/Promedios, an outside organization, the Zapatistas set out to train their members, beginning with how to capture human rights abuses, and eventually to produce educational and creative works. This strategy sought to reverse the dynamic of the first years of their insurgency, in which outsiders recorded the Zapatistas' situation, keeping ultimate control of the technology and storytelling.

Since that start almost a decade ago, Zapatista video has joined a widespread adoption of communication technologies by the hemispheric movement for indigenous autonomy. Video is being used intensely by Andean, Mayan, Afro-Colombian, and other communities throughout Latin America. These communities use the medium in pursuit of the ability to determine for themselves their political and cultural place in the Americas as well as give their voices, previously rarely heard outside their immediate communities, more resonance.

For the Zapatistas, giving voice to the voiceless is one aspect of their goal of autonomy, along with redistributing resources and establishing political rights. Indigenous autonomy offers a path out of the marginalization suffered for centuries by Mexico's and Latin America's indigenous. The outlines of the Zapatistas' goal were seen in the San Andres Accords of 1996. Had the Mexican government implemented them, the Accords would have provided indigenous communities with some control and protections over their land, public life, and culture.[1] When the government reneged, the Zapatistas implemented some of their principles independently. Video was a part of this, with production and training based in the community centers now called *caracoles*. Their use of video immediately provided a greater degree of self-representation, but it would not remain a purely cultural tool.

Zapatista video has been a part of three concurrent transformations. The importance of video to indigenous movements has grown, as it has for Latin America's latest leftist and populist movements. These grassroots social movements in Latin America have continued to evolve in their shared responses to the disastrous experience of neo-liberalism.[2] At the same time, communication technologies have undergone ongoing, global changes as they have become more widespread and interconnected. Transforming together, media and social movements are experimenting with new ways of practicing the politics of autonomy, socialism, and democracy that motivate these recent

movements. This experimentation has precedents in Latin America's history, but it has unprecedented possibilities for the integration of political and cultural practices.

The current closeness of video and politics in Latin America was preceded by the relationship between the New Latin America Cinema and the socialist movements from the Cuban revolution through the 1970s. Like today's movement video producers, filmmakers at that time undertook a cinema committed to the goals of their movements. In their work, the filmmakers tried to articulate practices that were not just expressions of socialist ideas but material realization of those ideas. The point of their filmmaking was to change its social context, starting with the making and dissemination of the films.

The films came out of the divergent situations that characterized Latin America at the time, from the cultural institutions established by Cuba's socialist revolution, to clandestine projects under a Chilean dictatorship. Filmmakers and critics identified links and similarities between these films, leading to a body of filmmaking theory. This theory was set out in the concepts of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's "Third Cinema,"[3] Julio García Espinosa's "imperfect cinema,"[4] and Jorge Sanjinés' *cine junto al pueblo* (cinema with the people).[5] Over a number of essays, the three ideas described a new kind of cinema. Solanas, Getino, and Sanjinés described different aspects of films and filmmaking that conformed more closely to Latin American realities and sought the collaboration of their subjects and audiences in their production. Espinosa, writing in Cuba, imagined a cinema in process, an imperfect art because of its dedication not to the art of film but to the ongoing transformations of socialist revolution.

All of these concepts put cinema in the context of socialist movements. They proposed criteria of commitment, perspective, accountability, and authenticity for socialist cinema. Their work sought the deepest possible integration of art and its political goals. Also, these concepts recognized films' tactical nature. Their cinema was a process, always changing, but also a potent material instrument. Sanjinés called the camera a gun, a weapon crucial to a revolution. The film scholar Julianne Burton later wrote, "Latin American filmmakers' attempt to create a revolutionary cinema took as its point of departure…the transformation of the subjective conditions of film production and film viewing." Rather than taking the role of watching and representing socialist movements, the filmmakers sought to bring the movements' transformative efforts to the context in which they worked. The filmmakers and theorists tried production collectives, new means of distribution, and other alternatives that would integrate their politics with their practices.

The impetus for this experimental integration has survived today. Zapatista videos, for example, are produced according to the principles of collectivity held in indigenous communities. The difference in today's experiments is the absence of one predominant ideology. The filmmaking of the New Latin America Cinema was held together by its period's unifying vision, a search in practice and theory for the ideal end-state of socialism. In that cinema's time, Cuba's revolution promised a common way out of the inequalities of capitalism and US imperialism. Many filmmakers practiced their craft in Cuba's ICAIC (Cuban Institute of Cinematic Art and Industry), and more watched films and other accounts of the country's economic, political, and cultural changes in pursuit of socialist ideals. Today, indigenous movements for autonomy co-exist or collaborate with leftist resistance to neo-liberal policies and populist movements that pursue democratic demands rather than ideological projects. Different bright spots of change in the Americas inspire different movements. The Zapatistas and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution have both been great spurs, though they are starkly different, while other movements such as Argentina's *piqueteros* and Brazil's landless groups have had narrower but significant influence. In this amalgam, experiments in the movement use of media are made with various, but intermixed motives. Just a few examples of Zapatista video and other recent productions from Mexico demonstrate the new possibilities opened by the shift from a unity of purpose to a proliferation of objectives.

The collaboration between the Zapatistas and the Chiapas Media Project/Promedios (CMP), a bi-national organization (based in the US and Mexico)

that provides "video and computer equipment and training to indigenous and *campesino* communities in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico,"[7] has resulted in over two dozen videos created by indigenous filmmakers and distributed within indigenous communities by Zapatistas and other movements, and by the CMP across Mexico and internationally. The goal of the collaboration has been to allow the indigenous communities to tell their own stories. This project of self-representation, a part of the politics of autonomy, has expanded along with the Zapatistas' growing capacity to produce video. Their productions went from documentations of the low-intensity war they faced to later films for education, recording community events, and sharing stories. As Alexandra Halkin, founder of the CMP, wrote, "video making is part of community life."[8] In this development, Zapatista video production has revealed new paths by which other marginalized groups can bypass barriers that had made filmmaking irrelevant to their context, such as the priority of individual authorship or commercially viable audiences.

Most Zapatista videos are made for showing in Zapatista communities. This use, seen in isolation, appears to seek no transformation other than carving out its own unique space of self-representation. Other Latin American indigenous groups, such as Quechua communities producing video in Andean countries, have prioritized this use. However, the Zapatista-CMP videos circulate out into new contexts, and their significance is stretched further when they're seen in these contexts. Videos are selected for larger distribution, which the CMP undertakes in Mexico, the US, and internationally. In Mexico, they travel through grassroots channels, screened by political and cultural groups allied with the Zapatistas' national movement, as well as in universities and film festivals not linked to the Zapatistas. In the US and beyond, the videos are most often shown in academic circuits and film festivals, some with political affiliations, some not. Across these viewing contexts, the videos can be seen as efforts of self-expression first, but they also communicate their motivation as practices of the Zapatistas' politics of autonomy

In the 2005 Zapatista-CMP video, *The Land Belongs to Those Who Work It*, a community surprises' a delegation of government authorities by documenting their entire unwelcome visit to discuss a property dispute. Watching this video in the US, one can guess that its primary motive is the defense of the community's autonomy. However, the video doesn't explicitly speak to foreign audiences, like the audience in Chicago with which I viewed it. While its distribution does seek to help support the Zapatistas

who made it, the video is not easily valuable to outside audiences, as either entertainment or information. In fact, its viewing breaks starkly with the tacit agreement of a normal screening, where the filmmaker promises to deliver satisfaction to the audience. While it appears to have been edited for length and possibly other issues of coherence, the recorded situation is presented without narrative, exposition, or other interpretive devices. The community's autonomy is defended in the recorded event, but why it is worth defending only gets expressed at the margins of the video's presentation. At its screening in Chicago, the host explained the video's content and connected it to the Zapatistas' politics and situation, including their struggle to secure common lands for cultivation.

Many of the Zapatista videos distributed by the CMP similarly forgo interpretation, leaving it to the distributor or presenter to help foreign audiences understand the video's motive. Videos are put in international distribution to generate solidarity with the Zapatistas and funding for the continued Zapatista-CMP collaboration. However, many of these videos are still principally for self-expression, one important part of the Zapatistas' efforts for cultural and political autonomy. When first viewed or viewed without extra explanation, this part of their politics of autonomy appears to be a gulf in communication, a muteness. However, the videos circulate accompanied by explanation, provided by the CMP or a Zapatista ally. The videos, when made by the indigenous producers, do not seek to either satisfy or convince foreign audiences. These goals lie outside their purpose of self-expression. However, in releasing videos for circulation, they do trust that sharing their efforts will be met with continued support from the CMP and the audiences who watch in good faith.

The trust and openness evident in the distribution of these videos breaks with the efforts of past socialist cinema. The videos do not seek to have their audiences join completely in the filmmakers' political project. The Zapatista-CMP use of video turns to external contexts for support, and accepts divergent values being grafted on to their work as it leaves their sphere. Part of this openness is a crucial feature of the Zapatistas' politics of indigenous autonomy, an active pursuit of intersections with movements that follow their own distinct goals, and in particular, movements for democracy and socialism in Mexico and Latin America.

The Zapatistas launched a new stage of social movements by linking their struggle for autonomy as indigenous people with movements in Mexico and internationally against the doctrines of neo-liberalism. They put forth a broad critique of the disenfranchisement and invisibility of indigenous Mexicans, as well as other excluded groups. They pointed to the neo-liberalism of the US and Latin American elite, exercised in free trade agreements and domestic economic policies, as responsible for the immiseration experienced broadly in the Americas. They have also been inclusive of alternative political programs in the discussions they have convened to find solutions to Mexico and Latin America's problems.

Early on in their movement, the Zapatistas invited the collaboration of other movements in Mexico and internationally. They reached out not only to other indigenous groups, but also to groups of workers, women, peasants, and other marginalized figures. Over their decade of engagement with allies and civil society, the Zapatistas have also articulated their take on socialist and democratic politics. These

1. http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/mexico/SanAndres.html

2. The history and analysis of recent Latin American social movements are being written only now, and much of it only as journalism. Alma Guillermoprieto's *The Heart That Bleeds: Latin America Now* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) covers some of their beginnings. Later, more scholarly treatments include *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998) and *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham: Duke, 2001).

3. Solanas and Getino were Argentinian filmmakers and critics. In their essay, "Toward a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," (In Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema.* London: British Film Institute and Channel Four, 1983.) they suggested a Third Cinema as an alternative for Latin American filmmakers from the spectacle of "first cinema" typified by Hollywood and the auteurism of "second cinema" seen in European avant-gardes.

4. In his essay, "For an Imperfect Cinema," (In Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema.* London: British Film Institute and Channel Four, 1983.) Espinosa argued for new criteria for the art of filmmaking in a revolutionary context. He sought to valorize the art for its reach outside art, even though this deviation would preclude its perfection as art.

5. Sanjinés and the collective of filmmakers, the Ukamau Group, wrote a number of essays, *Theory and Practice of a Cinema with the People* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editories, 1979), explaining their approach in creating documentary and fiction films in Bolivia. Although they touched on many aspects of filmmaking, they emphasized the need to collaborate with the film's subjects (often Andean indigenous communities), serve the interests of those subjects, and practice socialist principles in production and distribution of the works.

6. Martin, Michael T., ed. *New Latin American Cinema.* Vol. 1. Detroit: Wayne State, 1997, 19.

7. http://www.promediosmexico.org/

8. Halkin, Alexandra. "Video Fuels a Cultural Revolution," *Smithsonian American Indian:* vol. 2 no. 3, 30.

sides of the Zapatista movement, exercised in their national consultations and engagement in public discourse, have brought them into different degrees of overlap with other social movements. Around these intersections, more uses of media beyond the Zapatista-CMP "autonomist" videos can be found, and new links made between media and movements for socialism and democracy.

In *La Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign) held throughout 2006, the Zapatistas have undertaken a nationwide listening tour as an alternative to the concurrent campaign for Mexico's presidency. Subcomandante Marcos, as the Delegate Zero, set out to meet with groups in every state of Mexico who had joined the call to the Other Campaign. Adherents to the campaign belong to various ideological strands, and come from socialist, indigenous, labor, gender, and community-based groups. For hours at each stop, people have lined up to speak about their struggles. After each session, Marcos has commented on what he heard and connected it to other struggles in Mexico and a global struggle against capitalism. In these addresses and other communications, along with the adherents to the campaign, he has been elaborating a vision of a national anti-capitalist movement independent from Mexico's political class.

In this campaign, the Zapatistas and their allies have tried new uses of media, many of them packaged together through the Internet. The starting points for communications and documentation during the Other Campaign are two web sites, one for Mexico (enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx) and one for other countries (zeztainternazional.org). Significantly, the first has a blog-like structure, with periodic updates, plus links, files, photos, and other resources, and the second has a companion blog (lazezta.blogspot.com). Another primary site is the home of the Zapatistas' radio show, *Radio Insurgente*, which provides weekly updates on the Other Campaign, as well as interviews, music, and news from Chiapas. Numerous other sites have participated in a distributed coverage of the campaign, including Chiapas Indymedia (chiapas.indymedia.org), other Mexican Indymedias, and alternative news sites like Narco News (narconews.com). Connected to these sites are photographs and videos documenting the Other Campaign and related events.

The main sites and many of the connected sites are significant for their use of new publishing tools like blogs and RSS news feeds. From the start of the Zapatista insurgency, groups in Chiapas and Mexico have created web sites to help disseminate communications from the Zapatista. In the Other Campaign, the Zapatistas and their supporters have adopted advanced tools that most progressive organizations in the US have yet to utilize. Two important examples of the use of digital media by the Other Campaign are the regular production of *Radio Insurgente* shows and the campaign's adherents' use of the video-sharing site *YouTube* to publish their video of the campaign's events.

A search for "EZLN" on *YouTube* returns a list of over one hundred videos. Most of the videos seem to have been produced not by the Zapatistas, but by participants in the Other Campaign's events, who captured one part of Marcos' tour as it passed by. They then contributed their single perspective on this national undertaking to a flow of others' own videos. The collection of recordings provides only a shaky, irregular view of the Zapatistas' project, but offers many more choices of what part of the project to watch. With the adoption of digital publishing and sharing, along with inexpensive equipment, participants in the Other Campaign had the tools to produce work much closer to their personal experiences. They were able to go from the event to the production and finally to a substantial audience.

The *Radio Insurgente* website makes available archived radio programs since 2004. The shows are much more polished than the videos available on *YouTube*, and seek to be more comprehensive about the Zapatista movement and its Other Campaign. The shows are produced weekly for broadcast in Chiapas and by shortwave across Mexico. They are also archived and available for download online. The production of the shows follows well-scripted programs that regularly provide a mix of entertainment, news, and education. Tuning into a show, a listener will hear several songs, from indigenous music to Spanish-language pop, and then get an interview with a group or person participating in the Other Campaign. The radio hosts will also give updates from the campaign and from within Chiapas. These high-standard productions diverge greatly from both the amateur video and the Zapatista-CMP videos, because they seem to carefully seek a larger and broader audience and meet its expectations about content and aesthetics in order to connect with that audience. At the same time, the radio show producers are Zapatistas and keep production costs low by using new production tools, podcasting, and web-publishing tools.

It is important to note that these two sets of media, web and radio, were adopted by the Zapatistas and their allies during a campaign to reach out beyond their own movement. The Zapatistas have connected with other social movements since early in their insurgency, through encounters and consultations with their compatriots and international sympathizers. However, the Other Campaign has been easily their most thorough effort to interact with other struggles. Marcos' anti-capitalist ideas were crucial to tying together this campaign. The Delegate Zero sought to rally very different struggles around opposition to capitalism. In this effort, the media used in this campaign actively followed alternative modes of production and contribution. There may have been no directive from Marcos to prohibit commercialization of the campaign's media, but the tour's adherents seemed to follow his calls for Mexicans to organize themselves, both for their own struggles and as part of a unifying struggle against capitalism. In the use of blogs, podcasts, video sharing, and other tools, the media users directly managed their production and

contributed their work to a media commons from which audiences could select freely.

Unlike the leftist movements of four decades ago, socialism was not proposed by the Zapatistas as an explicit organizing principle for the Other Campaign or its use of media. Socialism in this effort did not operate as a program or strategy toward an end-state. Instead, the emphasis in the campaign on the common struggle against capitalism elicited practical attempts to realize, in limited and experimental ways, alternatives to capitalism. The unevenness of this effort—the use of commercial websites for distribution or publishing, for example—only reinforces that the Zapatistas and allies were willing to make experimental efforts. This informal socialism, more an ethic than a program, fits better within the multiplicity of social movements and ideologies that characterize the current response to neo-liberalism, as well as with the variety of media by which it might express and realize itself.

While the Other Campaign's call for self-organization has spurred experimental adoption of media in Mexico's social movements, it has not generated a guiding theory or proposals comparable to that in the New Latin American Cinema. The absence of a unifying vision or goals might explain why no single technology has become crucial to contemporary social movements. This situation is not necessarily a problem, and while the determination to centralize efforts around a single medium might yet become apparent, for now the plurality presents an array of creative uses of media, especially as the social movements developing these uses grow and change.

The latest stage of social movements in Mexico exemplifies this situation. In the 2006 election year, the politics of democracy have emerged as primary motivator of two distinct movements: the effort to elect the charismatic presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and the effort to remove the governor of Oaxaca. The first one, though tied to political parties, has some characteristics of a grassroots movement, especially when the close election led to challenges and street protests. Its most notable use of media was in the documentation of suspected electoral fraud, which spurred much of the massive support for López Obrador's denunciation of the election results. However, a fuller integration

of media and movement politics has occurred in Oaxaca.

Starting with a teachers' strike in the spring, Oaxaca's urban, rural, worker, indigenous, and other groups joined in mass marches, work stoppages, and occupations that have demanded the resignation of the state's governor. This movement culminated in the establishment APPO (Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca), a coordinating body that has rapidly adopted media to communicate its positions, denounce moves against it, and reach out to other groups in Mexico. Its use of media has included the use of radio broadcasts—including a few takeovers of commercial stations—and video recording of violent attacks against the movement by the governor's allies. It has turned to local newspapers but also its own web site (www.asambleapopulardeoaxaca.com) and allied sites to provide updates on its struggle. None of its tools are exceptionally innovative, but their use of media is remarkable for its rapid adoption of a variety of technologies, and the context of its production. The Assembly has generated its wide range of media while operating as a populist movement that welcomes all ideologies and constituencies unified by their goal of replacing the state's administration along democratic principles, without the use of violence. Each instance of its use of media will be instructive for its creativity in a situation defined by heterogeneity and continual negotiation.

Improvisation appears to be APPO's approach to media in its rapidly evolving situation. This movement may endure and institute unique uses of media, but its current importance is that it epitomizes much of the recent integration of media and politics. Both movements and media have proliferated in the past ten years, appearing abruptly and in different contexts, and rapidly changing. In Latin America's past, socialist movements took up film and other media that were also changing—film, for example had become cheaper and more portable—but today's pace of change and multiplicity have made the quick and flexible links of improvisation necessary.

The lessons of Zapatista video, the digital media of the Other Campaign, and the multiple channels of movements for democracy have yet to point to some decisive strategy or theory for employing media. No particular tool, production process, or content has fit recent movements better than others. A conclusive approach might yet emerge, but it seems that improvisation and openness are also viable approaches. If the future of Latin America's social movement is a continued multiplicity of ideologies and politics, and changing media keep offering simple, flexible options, then we may see an open-ended integration. Movements may adopt and drop technologies as quickly as their situations change, and productions may include a variable mix of documentation, anecdotes, testimony, or polemic. This new set of possibilities promises to keep media relevant to struggles to change Latin America, as social movements like the Zapatistas continue to link and grow in pursuit of their political goals.
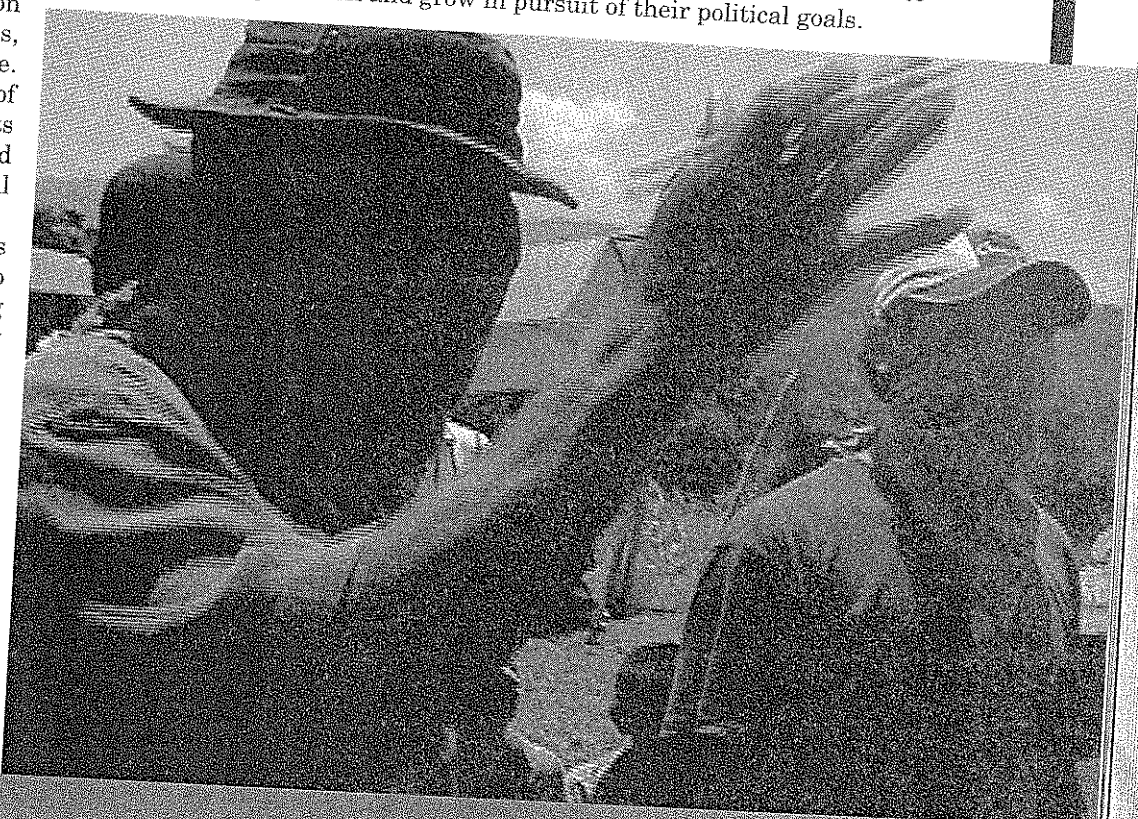
lance by the State. A government informant even participated in the Videofreex experimental projects in order to provide info for the FBI.[8]

The Videofreex[9]

Three people (David Cort, Parry Teasdale, and Mary Curtis Ratcliff) founded the Videofreex in 1969 and their numbers quickly grew to ten (to include Skip Blumberg, Nancy Cain, Bart Friedman, Davidson Gigliotti, Chuck Kennedy, Carol Vontobel, and Ann Woodward). Although they did not share a defined ideology, they did share the belief that, "placing video cameras...in the hands of ordinary people would make the world a better, more just, and beautiful place."[10] In 1971, they moved from New York City to Maple Tree Farm in the upstate NY town of Lanesville to live communally and make videos. This context helped them continue to develop a collective support system to make individual and group video projects[11] (as well as to be more eligible for funding than in the competitive NYC environ-

ment). In *Guerrilla Television*, Michael Shamberg writes of the Videofreex,

> They have also the most collective lifestyle, sharing expenses and space for living. This is in no small part due to the nature of the videotape process and the Freex claim to get it off most when they're all plugged in together...and taping collectively. They also, of course, make tapes individually using the collective support system.[12]

At Maple Tree Farm, the Videofreex began a pirate TV station called Lanesville TV.[13] In the beginning, they broadcast three times a week, later reducing to one. Lanesville TV was on air from 1972–1977, making it the longest running pirate TV station in the US (I have been unable to find evidence of any other US-based pirate TV broadcasts.) The Videofreex programmed both their own experimental work and local content such as town hall meetings or news from the local farms. They believed media should be interac-

The Videofreex formally posed in front of the Hunter, NY American Legion Post, 1973. Photo: Videofreex.

tive and participatory, and broadcast their phone number so that viewers could call in and comment on the broadcast. They also had plans for a media bus—a kind of touring video production studio—but this remained unrealized. The collective's practice was informed by a do-it-yourself, self-sufficiency ethic and a belief that users of technology should be empowered to fix it. They did not want the movement to have to rely on Sony to repair their machines, so they published a book on how to use and repair video equipment called the *Spaghetti City Video Manuel*. They also had a production studio on their farm which was visited by up to 200 people a year. These visitors would come to learn video skills and contribute to Lanesville TV programming.

Each member of the Videofreex brought different skills and interests to the collective, and their documents reflect their diversity (from art to social action from community building to video erotica, among other things).[14] In addition to the TV station, they made their work available to viewers through screenings in NYC and through what was called "bicycling" the tapes, meaning trading tapes through the mail via a network of other collectives and through listings in the movement periodical *Radical Software*.

Their documents were often raw unedited footage, shot hand-held without voiceover. The footage is gritty, black and white—the technical limitations were incorporated into the style. Their aesthetics were influenced by learning the new technology while using it and by a belief in process over product. Some members saw themselves as artists with cameras who were making TV experiments.

I asked Parry Teasdale, a founding member of the Videofreex and author of *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On* (1999) about the politics of the video collectives. He responded:

> I think the Beatles, Stones, and possibly Dylan were far better known and more frequently quoted than Marx (except for Groucho). I can't claim to have read *Das Kapital* and certainly wasn't a Marxist. I had read McLuhan and did read Michael Harrington's *Socialism*, and later Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, but theoretical politics was not a topic of discussion at Videofreex or among the other groups that we knew, at least to
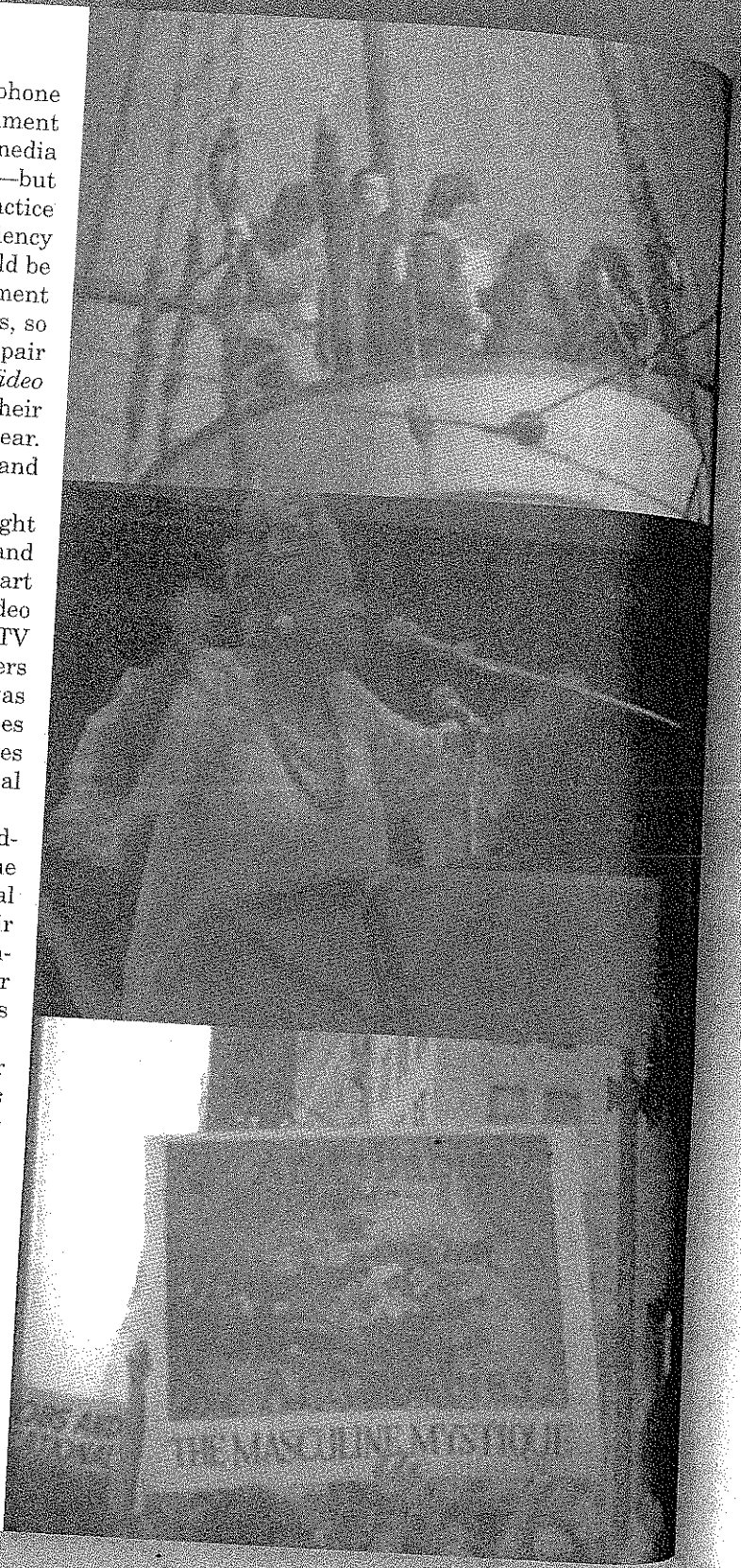
the degree I am aware of their internal dialogues. Certainly none of the video groups in and around New York City were modeled on any particular social experiment or based on a particular theory as I understand them. You should check with the others, though. This is not to say that we had no political outlook. But most of it was colored by a universal (among the groups) opposition to the war in Vietnam. I suppose we accepted the language of the political people that the war was in pursuit of American imperial ambitions. But anyone who went around spouting doctrinaire phrases like that would have been ridiculed or been made the subject of a tape. We did spend a lot of time in the early days taping Abbie Hoffman and other Yippies. And we had shot some footage of Tom Hayden, who was probably the most politically articulate of the anti-war movement people. But they were grist for tapes, and what we did we did in the service of furthering a more liberated television medium, not in service of a broader political purpose. Or so I see it.

Even in Teasdale's reporting of history he takes an anti-authoritative position—revealing his subjectivity, encouraging me to ask others for their version of the history.

I asked Skip Blumberg, another member of the Videofreex, if they were anti-authoritarian. He responded, "We were doing our own thing. Including lots of questioning. We did our share of protest videos, but concentrated on positive alternatives and our own imaginations." And if he knew if anyone in the movement was influenced by anarchist theorists? He responded, "That's an academic's question. Our crowd was too busy having adventures and keeping the equipment working." Regardless of what you label it, these tendencies of valuing the imagination, individuality, positive alternatives, and adventure all fall into historic and contemporary anarchist practice from Emma Goldman to CrimethInc.

Through working with the Videofreex in trying to assess, preserve, and distribute their work many questions arose.[15] Some of these questions are valuable for contemporary collectives to think about: What should happen to a cultural product that was intended only as part of a process? Who owns the materials produced in a context that resists ownership when that context no longer exists? When one believes information should be free, from where and

how do funds emerge to pay to maintain access to the information? If there is money to be made from a collective project that is no longer functioning, who should profit? Given the challenging task of preserving obsolete formats of moving-image media and the possibility that it can't all be migrated to contemporary and viewable formats, who should get to decide what is saved for the public record? With the abundance of documents produced, where and how can they be maintained for future generations? When collectives dissolve, who has the authority to decide what happens to the work they have produced and who should get credit?

Other Groups and Tendencies

The Videofreex were just one group from this period, and they often collaborated with other video collectives. In 1971, the May Day Video Collective came together in Washington, DC to document the protests against the Vietnam War. People from around the country participated in the May Day Video Collective (including members of the Videofreex) by traveling to DC, shooting tape, and sharing footage. There was a cultural rejection of individual authorship; everyone was able to use any of the footage that was shot. This convergent and shared media practice to document the streets from an on-the-ground perspective evokes the atmosphere in Indymedia Centers during recent national protests (1999–2004). The documents created from these different historical moments not only overlap in their confrontational imagery of protest and repression, but also by the collaborative process in

8. Teasdale, Parry. *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On.* (New York: Blackdome Press, 1999), 140–149.

9. "Video Freak" was a common term for people in the video movement, and this group took their name, Videofreex, from that.

10. Teasdale, 47.

11. Smith, Pamela J, "Issues of Appraisal and Selection of Community Based Video: Assessing the Videofreex Collection," New York University, Master of Arts Thesis, May 2005, 9.

12. Shamberg, Michael and Raindance Corporation, *Guerrilla Television.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 16–17.

13. Abbie Hoffman had given them a transmitter when they were still in New York City in order to create a pirate station there, but it didn't get off the ground until they moved upstate.

14. Smith, 12.

15. I met with several members of the original collective in the Spring of 2004 and 2005.

16. Boyle, Deidre, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

17. From an email exchange with Bob Devine, 2004.

18. You can view all issues of *Radical Software* at http://www.radicalsoftware.org.

19. *Guerrilla Television* is out of print but used copies can still be found.

20. http://www.radicalsoftware.org
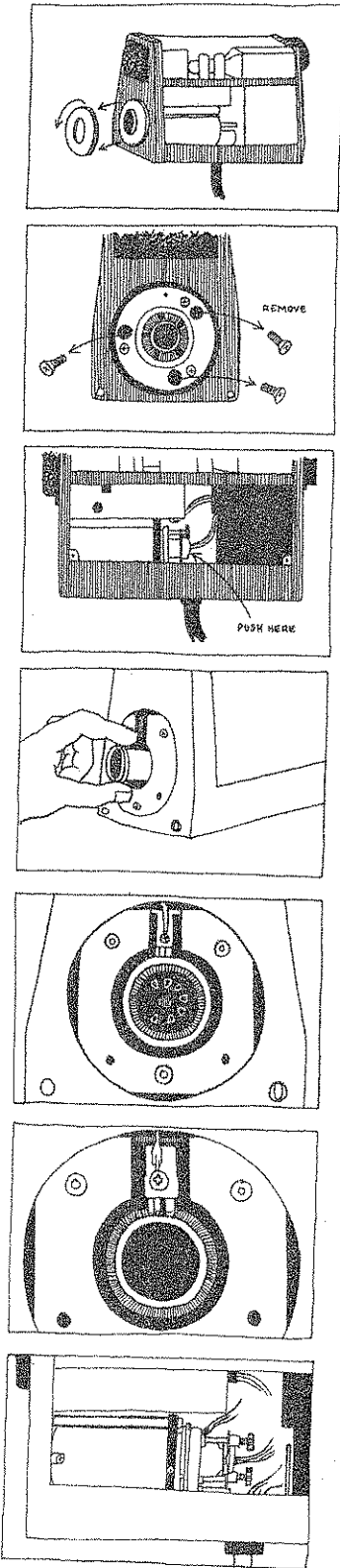
which they were created.

Many of the 1970s groups worked in a style termed "street tapes," interviewing passersby on the streets, in their homes, or on doorsteps. The goal of street tapes was to create an "interactive information loop"[16] with the subject in order to contest the one-way communication model of network television. One collective, The People's Video Theater, were specifically interested in the social possibilities of video. On the streets of NYC, they would interview people and then invite them back to their loft to watch the tapes that night. This fit into the theoretical framework that groups were working with at the time, the idea of feedback. Feedback was considered both a technological and social idea. As already stated, they saw a danger in the one-way communication structure of mainstream television, and street tapes allowed for direct people-to-people communications. Some media makers were also interested in feeding back the medium itself in the way that musicians have exper-imented with amp feedback; jamming communication and creating interference or noise in the communications structures.

Video was also used to mediate between groups in disagreement or in social conflict. Instead of talking back to the television, some groups attempted to talk through it. One example of video's use as a mediation tool in the early 70s was a project of the students at the Media Co-op at NYU. They taped interviews with squatters and disgruntled neighbors and then had each party view the other's tape for better understanding. The students believed they were encouraging a more "real" dialogue than a face-to-face encounter would allow because the conflicting parties had an easier time expressing their position and communicating when the other was not in the same room.

Groups were not only interested in making their own media but also in distributing it. At Antioch College, the Antioch Free Library (1966–1978) was set up so people could distribute their tapes by sending them in and requesting tapes in exchange. During its time, the Antioch Free Library copied thousands of tapes for free, sending out twenty-five to fifty a week.[17]

Theories of a Guerrilla Television

Many of the ideas these video groups were working with influenced or were influenced by the periodical Radical Software[18] started in 1970 and the book Guerrilla Television,[19] authored by Michael Shamberg in 1971. Both of these publications were developed by the group Raindance. Raindance got its name from R & D (research and development) and after the influential think tank, The Rand Corporation. They fancied themselves a think tank for the early video movement. Raindance was supported financially through the donation of $70,000 from a member's family money. Its mission was promoting video as a tool for change.[20] Raindance and other participants in the movement were heavily influenced by the theoretical work of Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, and Gregory Bateson.

Eleven issues of Radical Software were published between 1970–1974.[21] The magazine acted as a networking tool for these media collec-

tives. In the first issue alone, there was contact information for over thirty groups and individuals. Every issue included lists of available tape titles for sale and trade, contacts of video enthusiasts who had resources such as cameras or editing equipment to share, and articles crucial to the theoretical development of the community. Some of the ideas written about in the pages of *Radical Software* included: media ecology, the information economy, technological utopianism, media democracy, and video's therapeutic potential. In this space, art, cultural theory, community media, and activism all came together.

The term "guerilla television" came from Paul Ryan's 1970 article in the third issue of *Radical Software*, "Cybernetic Guerrilla Warfare." In this article he likens the use of video to guerilla warfare:

> Warfare...because having total control over the processing of video puts you in direct conflict with that system of perceptual imperialism called broadcast television that puts a terminal in your home and thereby controls your access to information. This situation of conflict also exists as a matter of fact between people using portable video for feedback and in situations such as schools that operate through withholding and controlling the flow of information. Guerrilla warfare...because

the portable video tool only enables you to fight on a small scale in an irregular way at this time. Running to the networks with portable video material seems rear view mirror at best, reactionary at worst. What is critical is to develop an infrastructure to cable in situations where feedback and relevant access routes can he set up as part of the process.

> Cybernetic guerrilla warfare...because the tool of portable video is a cybernetic extension of man and because cybernetics is the only language of intelligence and power that is ecologically viable...We need to develop biologically viable information structures on a planetary scale. Nothing short of that will work. We move now in this present information environment in a phase that finds its best analogue in those stages of human struggle called guerrilla warfare. Yet this is not China in the 1930s...In order to "win" in cybernetic guerrilla warfare, differences must he cherished, not temporarily suppressed for the sake of "victory."[22]

Michael Shamberg's *Guerrilla Television*, borrows heavily from different theories expressed in *Radical Software*, including Ryan's, but Shamberg expresses a less militant political view and, in several instances, claims that the movement is not political at all. He argues that, "In Media America, real power is generated by information tools not by
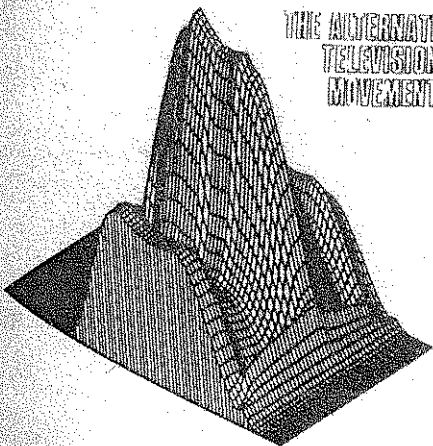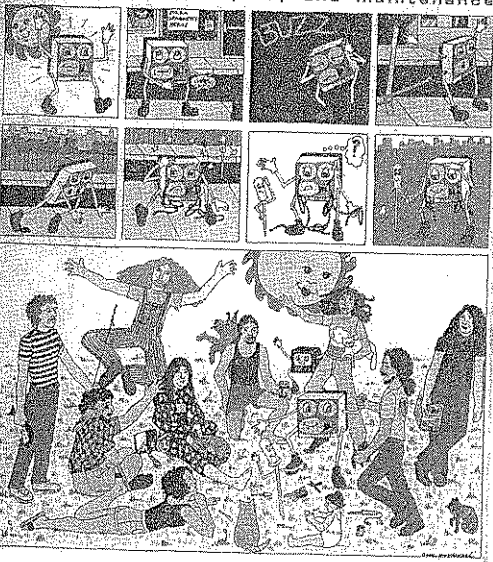
21. "Software" meaning the information/what was recorded on the videotape, "hardware" meaning the tools to make it.

22. Ryan, Paul, "Cybernetic Guerrilla Warfare," *Radical Software*, Volume 1, #3 (1971), 1–2.

23. Ibid., 2.

24. Ibid., 9.

25. Ibid., 12.

26. Ibid., 32.

27. Ibid., 21.

28. Ibid., 22.

29. Ibid., 36.

30. Ibid., 37.

31. Ibid., 24.

32. Ibid., 8.

33. Ibid., 53.

34. As video deteriorates quickly, there is a threat that certain time periods will have less and less visible evidence to view and learn from. Rick Prelinger of the Prelinger Archive spoke at a screening in Chicago in 2005 about how his generation, the Baby Boomers, were able to access tons of film made before 1964 to understand themselves and their world. He went on to say that my generation, people born in the 1970s, have very few ways to understand the context we were born into, due to the tightening of copyright laws around media. I want to extend the scope of this fear to the fact of the dissolving of the evidence itself, as video-based moving images quickly deteriorate and are not funded for preservation. There is another challenge related to these cultural artifacts: selecting what should be preserved from the huge amount of documents that these cheaper and more quickly processed video formats encouraged. VHS tapes, a familiar format to many of us, have a ten-year life expectancy. In our personal lives, some of us combat our fear of the loss of our memories of our families and friends through recording video. Quickly, we realize, it too will fade. And what then of documents of radical social movements and experimental cultures?

Today's even cheaper video and digital technologies allow us to amass a huge amount of documents of counterculture, everyday life, and social movements (among other things). Are we thinking about what will happen to them in five, ten, or thirty years? Are media collectives that have been documenting the alternative globalization movement cataloging their footage in transatable ways so that others might have access to t in years to come? Do they have a plan for what happens to the documents should the collective disband? Perhaps these are not useful questions to a movement trying to make useful media for he struggle right now, but studying the groups of he past makes me think perhaps they are questions worth thinking about.

opinion. The information environment is inherently post-political."[23] *Guerrilla Television* places a strong emphasis not on replacing content on broadcast TV (old structures) but actually transforming information structures of both production and transmission and building alternative support system for information. He states, "No social change can take place without new designs in information architecture."[24] And only through "radical re-design of its information structures to incorporate two way decentralized inputs can Media America optimize the feedback it needs to come back to its senses."[25]

Although, as already stated, no one from the movement claimed to be an anarchist, many of the ideas in *Guerrilla Television* critique societal systems from an anti-authoritarian perspective, including critiques of the education system, government bureaucracy, and, of course, television. Shamberg describes healthy systems as having diverse forms, complexity, symbiosis rather than competition, heterogenaity—all qualities that broadcast TV lacks.[26] I asked Paul Ryan where the anti-authoritarian tendencies in the video movement might have come from. He responded:

There was resistance to any ideology, particularly Marxism. For me it was another version of Catholicism with its emphasis on obedience. I distrusted authority...McLuhan pissed off the Marxists with his remark "Marx missed the communications bus." And McLuhan was very influential... I think the key turns around video perception undercutting the authority of language. Remember those in authority who were telling us what to do, were telling us to go kill in Vietnam.

I asked Ryan if he knew anyone in the movement who was influenced by anarchist political thought. He said he did not, but, "It was, however, 'in the air.' Kropotkin's name was known." I could not reach Shamberg for his input. He left the radical community to join the Hollywood movie industry and went on to produce over twenty-five major motion pictures including, *The Big Chill, Erin Brockovich, Pulp Fiction,* and *How High?* among others. Historians have attempted to interview him, but he thus far has not cooperated and seems to have distanced himself from his seminal text.

Regardless of Shamberg's life path, *Guerrilla Television* provides theoretical ideas and practical suggestions that are both sympathetic with, practiced by, and perhaps of use to contemporary anarchist media makers. One idea is around media literacy and education. Shamberg writes that, "tape was to television as writing was to language" and, "growing up on television...(without knowing how to make it) is like learning to how to read but being denied a chance to learn how to write."[27] He also suggests that using video might undermine the authority of teachers since schools want to promote the teacher's authority but, "video...allows students to generate their own knowledge."[28] This alternative vision for education was not just for children: "The new universities are any group of people functioning as a survival center, or who are learning by doing."[29]

The idea of survival centers seems particularly relevant in these precarious times. Survival centers would give people tools to survive in an information environment. "The true hope for success for an alternate culture is if it can become a valid information resource instead of a low variety parody of what it pretends to oppose."[30] Ideas about survival centers are connected to ideas about media ecology. "When our media only confirms their own product and don't move us to action, or at least pass
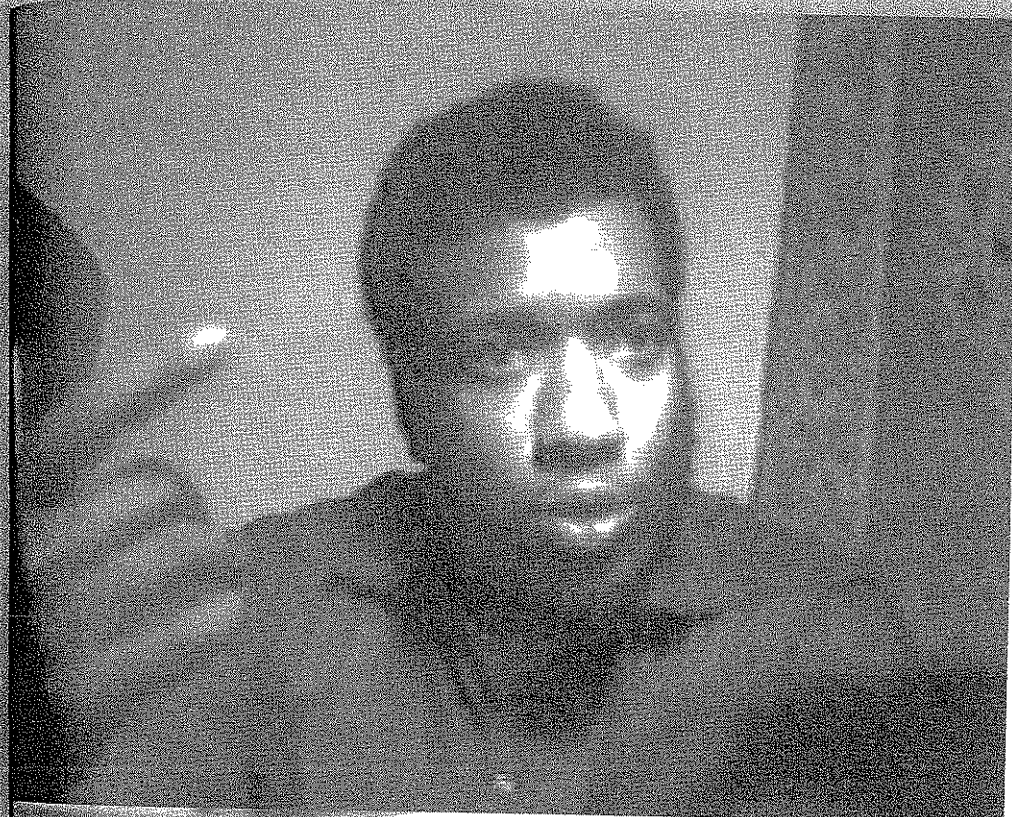
on survival information, they are no longer ecologically valid."[31] Media ecology criticized the overly-centralized, monoculture-producing dominant communications systems (similar to how ecologists critique factory farming and planting mono-crops). The ideas of media ecology ran parallel to environmental ecology in encouraging a diversity of form and the interconnectedness of systems.

The aesthetics of guerrilla TV documentary or "do-it-yourself TV" differed from broadcast news in that there was no spokesperson or mediator, it was mostly shot from inside events not outside, it included environmental sound, was from a first person perspective, and didn't have the traditional documentary "voice of god" voiceover (which was considered authoritarian).[32] There was an emphasis on a multiplicity of voices. There was concern with not exploiting the subjects and giving the subject the option to destroy any footage they did not want recorded. In Shamberg's words, "a participant should be given maximum control over his own feedback."[33]

Some of the concrete suggestions the book offers for decentralized communication projects include storefront information centers, wiring apartment buildings for closed circuit TV, pirate TV, micro broadcasts, mobile

shows, taping police behavior, taping broadcast TV crews, having festivals in domes and inflatables (challenging dominant architectural structures), using tape to decode bureaucratic structures, multi-monitor juxtapositions, and using tape to analyze behavior for therapeutic purposes. There is also a section in the book that attempts to help the reader figure out how to access enough money to make videos, which includes, among other suggestions, "sell your car."

Connecting to Today

There seems to be some continuity in thought of the media democracy movement over the past thirty years. Tendencies in thematic content include that regular people's voices, countercultural voices, and social movements matter. Engaged media attempts to include the subject as a participant and allows the participant to have a say in how they are represented. Process is as important as content; it is not just that alternative media is being made that is important, but how it is being made. Sharing resources, technological knowledge, and video footage is crucial to the process. Distribution is important. Non-institutional spaces for communication and information sharing are crucial. These may include storefront theaters and infoshops, artist-run spaces or community centers, bicycling/mailing media through informal countercultural networks, and pirate broadcasting. Publishing journals and magazines also supports the alternative social networks. Media should be decentralized and both localized and internationalized—reflecting local lived experience and struggle, and at the same time being shared through a global network with other groups interested in survival.[34]

The media landscape has shifted dramatically since the introduction of the portable videotape recorder, but surviving in the information environment is no easier. The media democracy movement has grown alongside access to the tools of media production at lower costs (i.e. digital cameras, personal computers, copy machines, the World Wide Web, etc.), yet corporations still seem to have a hold on our media, and the art market often absorbs our experimental cultures. The dream of the early video collectives is far from realized but it is still informative. Flipping through the dozens of channels on cable TV, there are certainly more offerings than the 1970s, but nonetheless, a monoculture of expressive forms and commercial values persist. The one-way communication structure of mainstream television itself has not changed dramatically. The World Wide Web has been the strongest threat to corporate controlled, one-way communication structures, and anti-authoritarians have been quick to pick up and participate in this medium. Interactive communication structures on a global scale have finally seemed possible, yet currently a battle rages with corporations (and the State) attempting to control access and use of the Internet. Anarchists and anti-authoritarians must continue critiquing the coercive power of dominant media structures and representations while at the same time creating alternatives that prefigure a media world we want to live in. The documents left by the early video movement remind us that as long as corporate media input into society exceeds radical, grass roots media output, the survival of our liberatory ideas and cultures are threatened.

This page: Videofreex, *Lanesville Overview 1*, 1972; next page: Videofreex, *Davidson's Jail Tape*, May 2, 1971. Images courtesy of the Video Data Bank.