

Michael
Shamberg - 1

CENTRE FOR ADVANCED TV STUDIES,
15, PRINCE OF WALES CRESCENT,
LONDON NW1 8JA ENGLAND

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MASTER
COPY

HOPKINS

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Shamberg - 2

Hop: I wanted to ask you about the state of the art with video in the States, but particularly with respect to distribution.

MS: Thats a difficult question. Distribution it seems is--I feel like Im talking to a taperecorder and not you--makes a difference to what I say--distribution is a whole problem right now. As in broadcasting the shape of the distribution system determines the information that goes out on it. If we want to have different information somehow the distribution system has to be structured differently. My own belief is--the nice thing is--that television as a whole is a throw-away medium, ^{its like} trash, its like a newspaper, you pay five pennines or a dime for it you look at it once and you throw it away, ^{dont want to save} ~~you read it~~ and you dont want to read it again. Thats the way television is, its just this on-going process and in a sense broadcast TV in the states operates on that scale economically, at least to the level that all you have to do is buy a TV set, we have no television tax in the States and you can watch as much TV as you want, ^{Now} ~~and~~ the costs are built in to the system along theline in other places..the costs are built into a tube of toothpaste because they have to spend 30% more because they spend \$30 million a year on advertising. But at the point of purchase, or rather the point of getting the information, its a negligible cost and, it seems to me that our information if its going to be effective, it has to be prolific and it has to be available so that ...it just has to be cheap. Which means you really dont want viewers to pay more than a couple of pennies to see an hour of your programming. Which brings problems in videotape. If youre going to distribute videocassettes to a small audience, say if youre going to try and sell them to an individual or a family, the raw stock cost is \$30, then to tack on the information

cost youre up to \$60 an hour or maybe a dollar a minute...thats crazy. Now there are ways to get around that. One is you sell to a University or a place where there are a lot of people accessing one tape so that when you average out the cost it comes down. The other one is to forget about tape as a distribution medium, and something like videodisc, which they say'll be along in 1975, where an actual pressed disc would cost 40c. for 60 minutes not including production and distribution but it would put it within the range of say a long playing record, which is really like an expensive movie. That is, rather than going to a movie I'll buy a record, I figure I might listen to it once, and its going to cost me the same as going to a movie.

Or another thing is cable television in the states where the system or somebody would pay you for the information and you would give them the material

Or even better you would have the system--and they do have these in the states--where subscribers pay for particular pieces of programming.

So anyway the precept we're working off of is that the information has to be available as cheaply as possible to the individual who gets it. And the question then is whats the system for doing that? And what we've experimented with is, first, exchange of videotape. It never really happened the way I think people wanted it to.

Hop: What did happen in exchange of videotapes?

MS: It happened sporadically. I dont know if you ever tried that here. Hop: Not really, but we did exchange some with Raindance for instance.

A NEW FOUNDATION AS THIS WAS. WAS INTO SUPPORTING A NEW FORM.

Shamberg - 3

MS: I remember that. I remember the Jerry Rubin-take-over the Post Show videotape. That was nice. It had more symbolic value than real value. They were so few and far between. I'd say Raindance in the heavy days were exchanging a tape a month, but you would never keep updating tapes, so it never did work out that well, it wasn't a good correspondence medium. Anyway that's kind of the most basic level. I think giving tapes away is the most basic level, and the second is the barter arrangement where you pay for tape or tape-for-tape. The third level is some sort of subscription sales. Now our experience in that has been also selling tapes through the mail where we were charging something like a dollar a minute, and we sold some tapes. But that was ~~xxx~~ always contingent upon an institutional awareness like at a University or a grade school where people have equipment, know how to use tape, and so on. Now that's an area that I think should be expanded cos it's like the scam you were talking about with ^{your own} books selling them to institutions at inflated prices. But they're not inflated prices. If your book goes into a library somewhere then that many people will see it who might have bought it otherwise, so the cost per reader gets spread out. So that's what's happening now. I know the Videofreex are very interested in it. Perry from Videofreex has done a lot of work with libraries in New York State, and they're trying to get libraries into setting up libraries literally with videotapes which theoretically could set up a market. As a second market for videotapes right now which is college distribution there are a couple of companies in the states that do it and...

Hop: Is this by videocassette or open reel?

MS: The one I know is doing it by open reel but it's designed to play

Shamberg - 4

into existing hardware so that they're really distributed in any format. That's the nice thing with videotape, with the exception of 2" where the costs are just out of hand, you can distribute economically in any format cos you can just take that signal and move it from 1" to $\frac{1}{2}$ " to $\frac{1}{4}$ " to $\frac{1}{8}$ " quarter inch that's not that much of a problem. It would be nice to standardise the equipment...that's the second thing this kind of collegiate distribution which doesn't function so much as educational material, it functions in the information/entertainment sphere where it might be shown in the student union where students gather, and so on.

Another level is cable television. We had some success with our convention tapes by selling them to 5 large cable companies, but it turned out it wasn't any matter of policy for them, we just had to cajole individuals within the system.

Hop: What sort of income do you get from them--not very much I imagine?

MS: Well the most we got ^{from a cable system} for a 60 minute videotape of the conventions was \$1000 from Teleprompter, and a like amount from Stirling. We never really had a contract with them and in the case of Teleprompter that gave them rights on all their systems for ever, but they're not using it so we'll never be ripped off by the agreement...so that's still another avenue. But in Cable in America, which I assume is ahead of the rest of the world, there's no money to buy programming. Now there may be money there in another way. One is--that big now--is concepts of Pay television where you put a black box on top of a TV set and you have a little card, and if a sporting event comes on....

Hop: Yeah they tried that here a few years ago and it folded up. It might be right to try again..the debris of the ~~xxxxxx~~ Pay TV

Shamberg - 5

experiment is being recycled into the ^{hardware of the} cable companies up and down the country.

MS: In the States they find that there's 2 commodities--with any new medium they start by doing what the other media did but they try and do it better--well they're starting out with 1/ movies, first run movies and 2/ sporting events, so if you can have access to a movie or a sporting event at home you'll probably do it. For example, if you want to see a movie for maybe \$2 or \$3, the whole family can see a movie whereas individually it would cost them \$3 apiece and, when you look at it, the rewards could be enormous. ^{TF} They're going to have 20% of the country wired by 1980 as they say, well 20% is 40 million in the home, 40 Million people that's 5,10,15 million homes you get a small percentage times 3\$ on one night and you'll clear as much on a film as on a year or 2 years of distribution. Now what that means for us is getting in somewhere on these pay situations and having people subscribe to our information. Having a channel.

Another possibility is to lease a channel, which the cable systems have to do. That is, give me the channel, I'll pay you X amount of dollars a year, I'll run the channel. I have 23 ways to support it.

One is, I can just ask for voluntary contributions, the second way is I can have an electronic system that doesn't give you the channel unless you've paid money, the third way is I can sell advertising on my channel.

I'm ranging from exchange of tapes thru the mail, to this system. The characteristic of them all is that they're all specialised distribution systems, which would support our type of work. But the one I've just detailed is the least known cos it's the least tried. And what it's really going to take is some entrepreneur, or someone with the

Shamberg - 6

in this interim time, will get them money for their tapes on an ad hoc basis. We did the convention tapes. We sold them to VHF stations, UHF stations, and ~~wazhadznewaz~~ cable stations, and we had never dealt with broadcasters before.

Our strategy now is similar. We going to do what we think needs to be done, both as a piece of programming and also contextually, that is as what's a good myth around a programme, and then we're going to distribute however we can, so essentially we're going to configure these ad hoc distribution channels for a system that ultimately, to be full time, would be... ultimately full time it's a system that doesn't really exist. We can offer smatterings of it, part time. And that's the kind of distributors we need too, is guys who can see in the long run it's not going to be what it is now, but we can do it now in bits and pieces.

Hop: That means that the income coming from that for quite a long time isn't going to be anything very much, but this throws open another question which is what we've talked about a bit already: how do you get to be independent, that is, financially self-reliant, if you can't expect much feedback/money from sales of software?

MS: You're asking and talking about what is in a lot of ways what we've been talking about. In the States, as I said at the Restaurant, you have a situation, video as we know it, that is, alternate TV, guerilla TV, ^{whatever the cliché is} ~~old vola~~, began primarily in New York State at the same time an institution called the New York State Council on the Arts-- A state Arts Council--began. It began initially with an \$18 million dollar a year budget, and the history of foundation support is that they're very conservative and they're not into creating new forms, but a new foundation as this was. was into supporting a new form.

Shamberg - 7

So that provided the initial basis of support for a lot of the groups.
In some ways...Videofreex actually began working for CBS.

Hop: Yeah they didnt do it for long. They got away with a lot of equipment didnt they?

MS: Yeah they got away..We began..Raindance which Im no longer part of.. was the idea of a guy named Frank Gillette..and he had some real fine ideas, and Frank found himself a rich kid who felt guilty about having a lot of money and put up \$30,000 which carried us for a year, so we wasted it, just terrible,

Hop: Thats ^{now} part of your ongoing strategy isnt it, to find people...

MS: Wait a minute let me go thru the history first
Then we switched to non profit and supported ourselves from New York State. Since Raindance had a de..... we moved to California and started TMTV, we're not eligible for state funding from New, obviously, have not been able to attract the large foundations; so our strategy now has been to try and find individuals who are relatively wealthy who like to use their money in creative ways. There are some, not a lot, of these people...

Hop: When you say creative ways, you're selling them social change.

MS: Precisely, precisely. A community of investors who are willing to invest one way or the other in social change. A lot of them have their own foundations, in fact. We've taken a different tack, to have them invest in structures, either partnership structures or corporate structures, and this is what we're trying now, where there are certain

Shamberg - 8

tax advantages if and when we lose all their money. We're not going to try and lose their money because we want to be self supporting.

Hop: This means in that case that you're selling them also what could be a cut from a profit making business. Whats the content of that business?

MS: Its funny that you ask what the content of the business because thats a question we're wrestling with right now. To raise money you have to write a prospectus. To write a prospectus you have to answer those questions and its real hard to answer those questions.

But the content of the business as I see it is changing television. Some of the people Ive worked with think its making television, and there's no real disagreement between us, but lets say its changing television. That entails a strategy. Now our strategy is that at this point the conceptual ground work is laid. There's certainly enough print information around and theres even a lot of people making programming. But its not all that good, and what we see is the thing to do now is to build models of what better programming could be. Models that both go to inform a public as to an alternative and also that other video people working in video can look at and maybe save themselves some time, picking up on techniques and stuff. The Conventions project served this purpose. The other projects we're doing will also hopefully also serve the purpose.

One is this idea called Prime Time which would be imagining what TV of the future might look like and...so what the company will be doing essentially is doing video productions of hopefully a different nature.

Shamberg - 9

Now theres a pitfall about because on the one hand we run the risk of just being another bunch of relatively bright young people doing commercial documentaries or whatever--theres just zillions of people ~~xxx~~ like that in the U S and I dont want to fall into that. Its a question of both stylistically keeping ahead of people but also conceptually trying to convince people that what youre doing is not like making documentary films which you hope to strike it rich by selling to the networks or something cos thats not what we're about. Thats one of our functions anyway, making these productions. The productions are based on the Prime Time idea was to imagine ^{not only} what the TV of the future would look like but how it would be produced . It wont be produced on 2" equipment. It'll be produced on 1" and 1/2". We're going to use all non- or what we call post-broadcast equipment to do it (its a useful cliché), so we're going to do those projects. BUT we spend a lot of other time on raising money, we do lectures occasionally cos that pays the rent, for example we did a workshop for teachers right before I left and we got \$800 for a day, which was, we did a lot of work for it but it was nice. We're doing another book on the future of communications in general cos, as we talked about at lunch, people can relate to print.

Hop: How well did Guerilla Television Sell?

MS: It sold about, theres about 20'000 copies in print and its probably sold about 15 of the 20, which isnt a whole lot by States standards, itll be 2 years in November and its gone into I think a 4th printing. Thats somewhat deceptive because they printed 1000 hardcover and 10,000 paper, then they immediately printed more hard covers (2nd printing,) then it went into a 2nd paperback printing...it did relatively well it wasnt that good a book so you know.

Shamberg - 10

Fortunately people are doing other books. Ken Marsh who works at Woodstock is doing a book which will be somewhat of the same nature, ranging from the metaphysical to the technical. The Videofreex are doing a book , apparently its a really fine manual for using Sony equipment. Then theres just been an incredible amount of publications like Video Tools, Radical Software, and so forth. Like anything, its produced more print and conferences than actual work.

Hop: I find those things a bit boring but they are a way of getting your money back at this stage of the game. Also spreading information does seem to have a, it does seem to help to do it with print..

MS: The book we're doing now isthe next 10 years in electronic communications. The first part will be on hardware, then we'll have a part on politics, economics, legislative, people who might be running things, and the last part we'll attempt to draw some scenarios, a totally optimistic utopian scenario, which won't happen, and a scenario of total crass commercialism which may happen, and then some sort of enclave strategy of whats the best radical or practical viewpoint ^{whats the best} we can hope for.

Hop : Nice.