

# that was the 80s...

**John Hopkins**, widely-respected journalist, film maker, campaigner and currently Co-ordinator at Fantasy Factory Video and Android Productions in London, marks the rise and fall of video access, the return to private enterprise and the imminent Camcorder Culture.

## ...that was

**T**he 70s were largely spent putting video on the public funding map. The Arts Council never replied to our first proposal, *COMMUNITY TV*, in 1969. Thames TV, who funded *England, Spring 73*, refused even to view the result. The BFI, who funded *SONG OF LONG AGO* in 1975, the first local history video with over 300 local showings, rejected it because "it didn't try to solve social problems."

But the Arts Council's 1975 Serpentine Gallery Video Show, and the founding of London Video Access and other outfits (later to be called workshops), marked the rise of video as medium in its own right. By 1978, when VHS home video was introduced, GLAA (Greater London Arts Association) had been running *VIDEO EXTRA* magazine for a couple of years, and had researched and funded the first public access edit system, at Fantasy Factory. LVA was distributing art product, *The Other Cinema* political product.

In fact, the UK scene was about ten years behind the USA, where TV stations KQED, WNET and WGBH, plus The TV Lab, were regularly putting experimental video on air, and state and federal funding was substantial. In Quebec, *VIDEOGRAPHE* was distributing programmes to cable TV. In Europe, video was developing fast: in Germany, for instance, WDR was airing experimental film and video, while a very strong workshop movement was supporting feminist and other political causes. In Australia, the network of video access centres was already under threat of funding cutbacks!

In the UK, the 80s saw the rise and fall of video access. In the early part of the decade, the Independent Film makers Association had a field day. Through it, prominent film makers successfully lobbied Parliament to make Channel 4 include provisions for innovative and experimental programming. Fortunately, their more bizarre, socialist ideas, like banning goal pornography from sports reports, were ignored.

"The institutionalisation of access... turned into the formalising of training."



The Greater London Council woke up from a seemingly eternal slumber, and, with Channel 4, started throwing money around like there was no tomorrow. Video, film and every oddball, offbeat outfit scampered to the orchard to catch the falling apples. As a result many projects received funding that enabled them to buy equipment and employ staff, and the new wave of talent began to emerge.

The ACTT, which in 1980 had stated that no non-broadcast video workers would ever join, created the Workshop Declaration, so that cheap programming could be made by certain 'franchised' workshops without the rest of its members going on strike. (Peter Keighron described this in the last issue of *IM*, so I won't repeat it here.) These workshops, based on film makers, then absorbed the majority of C4's funding and moved across into video.

Non-franchised workshops which dealt in access were consequently marginalised, despite assurances from C4's Alan Fountain (possibly the world's most maligned commissioning editor) that the channel was interested in the activity rather than the product. Nonetheless, the flowering of film and video culture was a direct result of C4, and, to a lesser extent, the GLC.

When the GLC and other regional authorities were abolished in the mid-80s, the bubble burst. Less funded productions meant less guaranteed work for access workshops, and the Regional Arts Associations followed suit.

Simultaneously, a new buzzword hit the industry: Training. The institutionalisation of access, which in 1985 I thought I could see coming, turned into the formalising of training. Different words perhaps, but similar action, yet because the emphasis on training is industry-wide, it theoretically gives access workshops an opportunity to de-marginalise themselves if they can find the cash. And there lies the rub. Take the London Region as an example...

In 1988, the BFI (British Film Institute), LBGS (London Borough Grant Scheme) and GLA commissioned the controversial Southwood Report, whose conclusions were based on the assumption that the funders would continue to fund video and film. What actually happened is different.

The BFI, which got a substantial increase in government grant, reduced the budget of all debts by seven per cent, and hence grants. The apparent reason for this paradox, restructuring and internal capital costs, conveniently hides a whopping loss by its South Bank tourism subsidiaries, the NFT (National Film Theatre) and MOMI (the Museum of Moving Image). Rumours of mismanagement are, of course, quite untrue, etc.

LBGS, one of the GLC's successors, confined its funding to vocational training and now dispenses a measly £160,000 for the whole region. GLA has become the ultimate bureaucratised institution, whose dull accountants' plans are as unreadable as they are unrealistic. None of the three bodies has any money for capital equipment grants. The Southwood Report has not been much use, except to Southwood.



Most groups that still exist - and a number of those that have vanished - have been put through the 'consultant's report' mangle. The idea is to make lots of consultants rich by explaining why groups cannot turn themselves into nice little corner-shop businesses, enabling the funders to cite 'objective' reasons for what they wanted to do anyway, ie- cut funding. Although this method is simply government policy passed down the arms-length hierarchy, it's also a face-saving substitute for straightforward behaviour and plain talking by the funders. It's corny as hell, and the sight of so many 'leftists' doing the government's bidding has a familiar ring.

Would there was a Jeremy Isaacs on the scene with the balls and prestige to tell them to stuff their policies up their own arts-holes. But the fact is, if they don't get the money, their cultural policies are of no further interest to practitioners on the ground.

So what about the 90s? You can forget about grant aid as a serious source of income. You can kiss goodbye to access as a legitimate activity supported by public tax money. You can forget 'art' and 'culture' as activities that generate official enthusiasm. And you can also forget the inverted racism, the loony left and all that liberal cant that typified the death throes of the GLC.

Instead, its back to private enterprise hustling your ideas in the market place, looking for openings, being an entrepreneur. Fortunately, TV and video have expanded enormously since the 70s, so there are many more opportunities for making and selling programmes. Likewise, equal opportunities policies have taken hold

in the mainstream and for disadvantaged people there will continue to be low cost ways to get trained, though arguably never enough of them.

What began for many of us as an exploration of alternative modes of using electronic media in the days before they became diffused throughout society, has been largely absorbed by the structures of society itself, with the institutionalisation and formality that goes with it. If you can grok it, then go with it.

Personally, I'm beginning to have other thoughts. It was as much fun going around the world for three months with a Video-8 camcorder as it was running an access facility for 10 years in Central London. Planetary issues have surfaced and need addressing and this is what's different now, for me.

The 90s should be very exciting now that the technology is so small that you can, literally, tuck your video in your backpack and go have adventures. What's more, with a bit of suss, this should also be a way of earning money. I met people in the US who are already putting Hi-8 to air, and not just for hot news. One day, British broadcasters will drop their pants and say: "Yeah. We can use it," but not before satellite TV has forced them to go for more and cheaper programming.

Its really encouraging that **Independent Media** has lasted all this time: I hope you can get through the current recession. Video culture is alive and well and most of it is independent, the only state of mind worth having. See you on the beach or at the barricades.

