

# VIDEO ACCESS

## INTRODUCTION

Video Access is access to high technology (hi-tech). The government seems to want to encourage this. Video Access is a means for citizens to understand what is involved in block terms in making TV programmes, and to gain familiarity with the simpler 'nuts and bolts' of the technical side. Video literacy is important for citizens living in a hi-tech democracy.

"Access"—principally the provision of video equipment, training and technical back-up; but including production support, information and referral—has been happening in the UK since 1969 when the half-inch portapak was introduced. Since 1973, access has been acknowledged by arts funding bodies, the cable TV experiments of the 1970's and other observers such as the Council of Europe; not to mention the BBC and other TV companies that have run 'access' TV programmes for citizen groups to voice their opinions. In the mid/late 70's there was much debate in middle class circles followed, inevitably, by a rash of undergraduate theses that continues unabated into the present.

Access is something everyone has heard of. Today, young people expect access to be provided by grant-aided projects as a matter of course because they know others have had access in the past. And—just as significant—so do the various bodies providing grant aid be they the Arts Council (for artists), Regional Arts Associations (for independent producers, community artists and groups, visual artists, dance and theatre groups), the British Film Institute and latterly the Greater London Council.

Nonetheless, a consistent problem for organisations operating access has been their inability to secure adequate funding.

One purpose of this paper is to bring out some of the contradictions of video access as it is funded today. At this point we note that video has always been given second place to film in funding priorities, and recently video funding—mainly from Channel 4—has prioritised production at the expense of access. So, a decade after video access was put on the map, it is still treated like a poor relation to film in general, and to production in particular.

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The plain fact is that, while production has received a welcome stimulus enabling a new generation of TV producers to get up and walk, access has once more been pushed to the end of the queue.

## THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF ACCESS

Factors frequently cited for this state of affairs are:

1. Inadequate non-organised lobbying by video access workers.
2. Ignorance by arts administrators of the skills and expertise needed.
3. Access workers allowing themselves to be exploited year-in, year-out by accepting worse terms and conditions (low pay, no job security, long hours) than their fellow workers in film and production.

Although correct, these generalisations don't help to clear the undergrowth of misconceptions and laissez faire that have been built up over the years. What's more, they cloak a number of serious points that should be brought out.

## ACCESS IS A PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

The provision of video access requires a similar infrastructure and set of skills to that of the Facilities House. But unlike a facilities house, many of an Access Centre's clients (users) are novices technically and, in addition, naive about normal professional behaviour. So more time needs to be spent with each client than in a commercial facilities house—it is labour-intensive.

The complexities of providing access are just as arcane as those of production. An organisation needs a suitable structure in addition to the normal administrative, managerial and secretarial skills. It should be able to:

(a) **Explain** Deal efficiently with a wide range of users many of whom need help in understanding what is/isnt possible because they're unfamiliar with video and its limitations. This includes adjusting people's expectations to be realistic.

(b) **Maintain** equipment so that it works, with sufficient back-up to replace it when it goes wrong. (To have sufficient spare equipment means greater capital investment).

(c) **Teach** users, from first principles if necessary, how to operate equipment both to get satisfactory results and to prevent damage. Users often bullshit about their skills and experience so as to 'save time and money'...and then more time is needed, often involving considerable re-working..

(d) **Refer** enquiries to other places if questions cannot be answered, or services requested cannot be provided by the project concerned e.g. telecine, standards conversion.

(e) **Make Positive Discrimination** Operate a Rate Structure based on stated criteria which offer different levels of subsidy to different types of users. This is inevitable when working in the non-profit sector whose constituents range from non- or self-funded 'street level' individuals and groups such as residents organisations, to relatively well-heeled enterprises like local government departments and the larger charities.

In passing, we remark that it is no wonder that many of the Film Workshops have difficulty in providing access when the main context of their work has been (and still is) production. Access requires a different set of attributes from those required by production. And since the Funding Bodies' representatives often have a background in film, if access is to survive at a professional level, they also have some learning to do.

## ACCESS WORKERS NEED A RANGE OF SKILLS

The above organisational requirements have to be operated by people working within a suitable framework. All organisations need to do typing, bookkeeping, administration and fundraising in addition to their main work. Whether this work is shared equally by all (as in a cooperative) or whether some people specialise in particular aspects (as in a commercial company) is of little importance; but it does mean that access workers themselves need a number of specialised skills:

(a) **Informational** To give coherent explanations and guidance to users, a worker must have a clear practical grasp of the subject which can only be acquired from work experience. The same is true of referral; you need to have a good overall idea of the structure of the industry and how it works, plus a knowledge of your local support infrastructure. No one organisation can support all demands and they are often referred to other bodies for particular information or facilities, both outside and within normal commercial circles.

(b) **Technical** Electronic equipment is hi-tech and knowing how to fault-find, adjust and keep it running, as well as preventative maintenance, is another skill that has to be picked up in practice. Even a broadcast technician or a video engineer have to familiarise themselves with Japanese design before they can adequately deal with technical problems. Access users understandably get upset if they find out

later that the programme they spent time and money on has irremediable technical faults because staff were incompetent—a complaint often heard in these circles.

(c) **Tuition** To train both beginners and experienced users needs a developed sensitivity that also can only be acquired in practice. Training skills are NOT the same as technical skills though they may depend on them to a degree. The user has to be taught in a logical and developing way so that they avoid habitual mistakes and acquire knowledge coherently. A competent trainer has to have 'split attention' with one eye on the trainee/user and the other on what is being taught. Users must also be taught in a uniform, repeatable manner with the subject matter divided into easily assimilable modules with back-up written material. All this has to be provided and thought out before teaching begins. Otherwise, one trainer will take a different approach from another (say, when a shift changes) and the user will suffer.

(d) **Interpersonal and bureaucratic skills** Dealing with the public means fielding the unpredictable and trying to deal equitably with all sorts of people making demands, while staying courteous—both in person and on the phone. Not always easy, after a hard day or if the caller is unreasonable or immature; but important to, and usually taken for granted by users. Again, this is something that has to be learned, along with the discipline of keeping records in 'real time' so that you don't have to start afresh each time the same person calls.

In a small organisation, each access worker has to acquire all these skills—even if Job Descriptions are different, division of labour cannot be relied upon to exempt a worker from acquiring any of them.

Consequently, any new access worker has to be trained 'on the job', and this takes up organisational time. As a rule of thumb, it takes at least 3 months (often longer) before a new worker can be left responsible for operating access without supervision. Thus, each time a worker leaves, the organisation has to direct part of its resources inwards to train his/her successor, reducing the level or quality of what's on offer to the public.

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They usually migrate after a year or two either to become professionals in other areas of video such as production, facilities, etc., or to continue in the voluntary/social services sector where there is a better career structure. The best an access worker can hope for is to become a part-time project administrator—and you can count on the fingers of one hand those who have weathered it out for the last decade in the UK. Even those who have stayed the course probably did so because they were single with few outside commitments. In today's climate of employment what keeps access workers at their jobs is a combination of genuine social commitment, plus to a smaller degree fears of unemployment. The latter is no a strong factor in the long term because a properly trained access worker can go and get job in the still expanding video industry.

## ANNUAL FUNDING GIVES NO LONG TERM PERSPECTIVE

The hurdle of hustling for annual funding not only takes up an inordinate amount of administrative time but also has detrimental results on the people in an organisation. Work contracts cannot be for periods of longer than one year, and the continued uncertainty about 'next years funding' means that morale periodically gets low as annual decision time approaches.

Of course, there should be an annual assessment of arts funded projects in case remedial action has to be taken. But note that the Workshop Declaration has 3-year funding built in, which is only realistic (a) if all the funding comes from one or two sources that are signatories to the Declaration, and (b) in an expanding sector, if funding bodies can find more funds each year. In contrast, arts funding bodies rarely give guarantees for longer than one year, and where they have done so in the past (e.g. Arts Council promises to devolved Community Arts clients) the level of guaranteed funding has not been sufficient to ensure the survival of an organisation.

## MINIMUM STAFFING AND SALARY LEVELS SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED

As stated earlier the Workshop Declaration established a minimum staff complement of 4 persons each getting £9037 in the current year. Access organisations should get similar consideration, since the minimum number of workers is the same unless nested in some other organisation like an Arts Centre. As to salary levels, the skills and professionalism required are comparable to those required for production and, unlike production, access is less sporadic and more of a production-line affair with regular office hours and long ones at that.

## TODAY'S ACCESS USERS COULD BE TOMORROW'S PRODUCERS

As the (now) Channel 4 controller Paul Bonner acknowledged in the late 70's, access is one of the seedbeds for new production talent. In an industry where training is on the whole scarce and expensive, or takes a full time course at a polytechnic with prior qualifications, access is a way for people to get a feel for video in a relatively short time. There are many industry professionals working today who got their first experience of video in the early access projects of the 70's, whether voluntary organisations or experimental cable TV stations.

One good thing about our industry is that its still quite easy to get into if you've got the talent and the drive, and access is one of the doors.

Channel 4 in particular has benefitted from access projects because would-be producers have been able to show their work prior to getting commissioned for pilot projects or new work. However this 'indirect' link between access and broadcast has ceased to carry any weight with Channel 4 whose commitment has drawn back from anything except token support.

## CHANNEL 4 AND THE ACTT

In the early 80's, the presence of Channel 4 and its proclaimed intention of stimulating the cultural sector has had a great effect on "independent" and grant-aided activity. The lion's share of "Workshop" funding went to film workshops, and a much smaller share to video workshops. The discrimination suffered by video workshops, in particular the holding back of funding until the last 3 months of Year 2 and the subsequent attempt by Channel 4 to cease funding altogether after one year, may still reap long-term disaster because of its destabilising consequences.

By the start of 1984, Channel 4 with the help of the ACTT had persuaded the now defunct Video Section of the ACTT to accept the extension of the Film Workshop Declaration to video. Its effect has been to give Film Workshops funding to work on video for broadcast, while access-oriented Video Workshops have not even been able to afford broadcast equipment. Access, meanwhile, has been pushed aside to catch the crumbs.

Channel 4's decision to concentrate on the funding of production for TV rather than citizen access should have been predictable, despite their 1982 statements to the contrary. After all, they are a TV company and don't like to be regarded as providers of grant-aid.

The ACTT, as the main Union in film and TV, resisted admission of non-broadcast video workers until 1981. Since then, following a recruiting campaign in the sector, some hundreds have joined many of whom have gone on to work in broadcasting.

The ACTT's Cultural Committee and its predecessors have made much of the Workshop Declaration, originally hammered out to allow certain film workers to make TV programmes at salary rates lower than those in the ITCA agreements, under quite stringent limitations. When, this year, the Declaration was extended to video, the effect was to create 2 classes of members: those in the (2 only) "Franchised" Video Workshops getting guaranteed funding for 4 workers and index-linked salaries of over £9000/year, the rest getting whatever they could scrape together from the remains of the funding pool.

Ironically, by its very existence the Workshop Declaration has established de facto norms in the cultural sector for both salary level (£9037 in 84/5) and minimum staffing (4 workers per organisation), and these norms are already being operated by organisations themselves outside the Declaration e.g. the IPVA's 2 most recent jobs are currently advertised as "ACTT Workshop Rates".

Murray Martin of Amber Films (an ACTT Franchised Workshop) has this to say:

"(workshops)...are not access facilities...we're very keen to establish a professional status for what we do"

--Television & Video Production,  
No 1, p28, Sept 84.

The implications of his expressed attitude are:

1. Access organisations should not be accorded 'Workshop' status.
2. Providing 'Access' is not a professional activity.

In truth, access work is a lot more boring than production because it is less varied and the outlets for creativity are fewer. Perhaps this is why it is looked down upon by the film intelligentsia whose backgrounds owe so much to film production values and the 'auteur' theory inherent in film tradition.

## CAPITAL INVESTMENT IS NOT MATCHED BY RUNNING COSTS SUPPORT

One of the curious aspects of capital funding to Video Workshops is that in Channel 4's case it was only matched by running costs funding for the first year (two after pressure), and the GLC often gave projects a choice of either capital OR running costs funding but not both.

As a result there are now pockets of equipment all over the country worth, in some cases, 5-figure amounts, that are in danger of falling into disuse or disrepair because the running costs needed to keep an organisation alive and active are not forthcoming.

The imbalance between recent capital funding and on-going revenue funding can be traced back to a simple lack of commitment on the part of the funding bodies, which itself depends more on a lack of understanding of the economics of access than a deliberate intention to throw away hard-won capital investment.

It is legitimate to ask why so much Running Costs funding is needed. You have the equipment, runs the argument, so why can't you earn your running costs?

The answer is in two parts. One, given sufficient time a proportion of running costs can be supplied from earned income. In this case sufficient time means a minimum of 3 years. We note that Channel 4 is not expected to go into profit until at least 3 years has elapsed from its opening, indeed this may be optimistic. So why expect a tiny access project to do it in less?

Unlike a TV company, to earn significant amounts of income an access project has to change its approach in order to relate to the commercial market place; it has to develop another set of skills that in most cases are

hard to acquire because social commitment often goes hand in hand with a rejection of normal business practices and attitudes. In the authors' view, this is a real impediment but one that must be overcome in order to survive.

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## PROFESSIONAL PUBLIC SERVICE NEEDS PUBLIC MONEY

The second part of the answer turns upon normal business economics. It is a common illusion that commercial operators get rich and fat quickly on the enormous profits to be made in the industry. Of course a few of them do, but in the last 3 years some market sectors have expanded so fast that supply outstrips demand. Most enterprises cost out their work realistically on the basis of between 5% and 15% net profit after all bills and salaries are paid. Commercial prices have modest margins not large ones. On the whole, large profits are made by increasing the volume of work, not the margins.

Therefore, if an organisation is providing both commercial services and access (which by definition is at lower than commercial rates or it isn't access), it is just not possible to do this without subsidy to support the access activity. Nor is it realistic to expect this to change in the foreseeable future.

It must be stated clearly that far from having the expectation that 'after some years you will be self-supporting', grant-aid bodies have to swallow the unpalatable truths that NO ACCESS PROJECT WILL EVER BE SELF SUPPORTING and that A CONTINUAL FLOW OF PUBLIC MONEY WILL BE NEEDED to balance the books.

The only question is How Much?...and the only answer is...Enough to ensure that the minimum complement of workers get the de facto salary level and that, by combination of earned income and grant aid, allover overheads and bills are paid. Without this, Access projects will always fail to meet the public's expectations with half-baked, inexperienced people running them on a shoestring.

Several points follow that access organisations themselves may find unpalatable. In return for longer term support, grant aid bodies will probably demand more detailed accountability (quarterly rather than yearly), quantifying of benefits to the public rather than just general statements or 'political' arguments, and perhaps membership on the controlling bodies of the organisations.

What it adds up to is the INSTITUTIONALISATION OF ACCESS. Is this the right price to pay for greater security, a career structure and assimilation into public life in the English tradition? Or are there other solutions that are not, ultimately, dependent on the taxpayer?

Whatever the answers to such (rhetorical) questions, one thing is clear--the funding basis of video access must be improved if it is to be a viable public service and the so-called funding bodies have the responsibility.

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John Hopkins/Sue Hall, Fantasy Factory Video, 42 Theobalds Road, London WC1