Everybody Will Be On Television

By Sami Klein

When my jacked revolution comes, everybody in the world's gonna be on television all the time. Then there's gonna be an "information explosion." No more names. No more signatures. No more selective newsreader psychoses. There's gonna be TOTAL ACCESS. TOTAL ACCESS.

-Said in AC/DC Television is dynamic, and we're leaving it around for any idiot with a match.

A British TV director, quoted in Newwest

Armed only with two half-inch Sony portapacks and a Hasselblad, bearing the dubious credentials of an imminent underground video magazine, three video veterans and a neophyte descended upon NASA headquarters, Cocoa Beach, for coverage of Apollo 14. Nodding deliberately at our hardware, NASA officials quickly handed us 24-hour pink press passes.

The night before launch: We drove—closer and closer to the towering white rocket bathed in floodlights. One mile, one-half, one-quarter—we were almost at the summit. 250,000 people were there without a ticket, we were almost up close and personal. One mile, one-half, one-quarter—we were almost at the summit. We asked them, "What's gonna be there?" They said, "We just don't know."

Which made half-inch video revolution? First, its low cost. Sony portapacks retail for about $1300—and, the word is, the Japanese sell a camera domestically for about $40. Furthermore, there is no costly processing of tape, such as there is with film and even stills.

The second factor is the machine's simplicity. Anyone can shoot reasonable tapes right from the start. There just isn't that much to know.

Finally, there's video's unique capability to set-up instantaneous two- or multi-way communications between "viewers," who are also "actors." As John Reilly of Global Village video theater puts it: "The real excitement here is that you can turn the theater into a studio." The political implications of video, in terms of helping to define and articulate the interests of groups which up to now have been deprived of a voice (or at least an audience), are perhaps the most far-reaching. Consequently, much of the rhetoric that has grown up around video has focused on its "political." But it is crucial to realize that no aspect of modern culture is likely to remain unchanged. Art, music, drama, sociology, psychology, education, religion—all will be, all are being, profoundly affected. Video communities are springing up all over the country, composed of groups and individuals exploring such diverse areas as pure, propaganda, community action, self-processing, hip soap opera, electronic ministry and abstract composition; color and black and white.

A revealing Freex idiosyncrasy is the "mediabuses" with cameras, playback decks and monitors, on which they will travel around—making tapes, teaching people to use the equipment, and linking community residents up to local cable facilities. They also hope to "liberate" equipment, which, as Leo explained, is being used in schools and universities in "the most dull, boring ways," or worse yet, isn't being used at all. "It's locked in closets," Leo says. "Strange people you never see have the keys."

In a substantial library of tapes ranging from political (Panthers, Women's Lib, Rotary meetings) to humor, Freex include service tapes such as "How to Build Doomes," or "How to Get an Abortion." All can be rented very cheaply.

People's Video Theatre in New York is also community-oriented but has no taste for ideology. "The only thing that can be alternate in this society," co-founder Elliot Glass says, "is that the power will be in, the hands of more people than it is."

Instead of pushing a point of view opposed to the established one, People's Video aims to "provide the place where points of view can be exchanged," which, Elliot notes, "is really maybe what media communications is about."

Nevertheless, most of People's Video's work is with the underdog, and in an upcoming project, they will be working with the Young Lords producing a series of tapes examining Puerto Rican culture which "might be a basis for them to politicize the people on the street." In addition, the weekly show at the PVT left features a live forum, where cameras turned on the audience record its response to specific issues aired on tape.

One video group that mixes both politics and entertainment is Global Village, directed by Rudi Stern (a former kinetic light artist) and John Reilly (a former filmmaker). Juxtaposing political, rock, and communications is about.

The opera will utilize lights and other environmental effects and will probably not have a live audience.

Global Village is also publishing a video cassette magazine, in full-color, which will be coming out this spring. Containing mini-documentaries on various alternate culture topics including activist groups and rock, it will be distributed initially to colleges and universities. Reilly is soliciting tapes from other video artists and hopes that students, once they see the magazine, will be encouraged to set up "mini-stations" on campus that will feed material back to Global Village.

Another video group working out of New York, Raindance, is putting out a magazine—in print form—called Radical Software, which is sort of an underground video trade publication. Raindance also produces all sorts of tapes, among the most interesting of which are self-processing or self-evaluation tapes. "With video we can know the difference between how we intend to come across and how we actually do come across," Paul Ryan has written in Radical Software.

"What we put out, what is taken by the tape, is an imitation of our extended image, it is our monkey. A video system enables us to get the monkey off our
freaks who needed help talked into a
heyday of the hippie, Lee Kaminski, a
Clinic (fordrug freakouts) during the
therapy. At the Haight-Ashbury Free
the tapewhere we can see him.
backs where we can't see him, out onto
rash, haven't you?
how vulgarly sane.
Sadie, an American black who issome-
media, “Maurice, a schizophrenic, and
production as “an alcoholic stupefiedby
human psyche. The main characters are
's production of Heathcote Williams'
and flexing muscles) of “My Sweet Old
in his adhesion to the drug
power inherent in the immediacy of
video—in the ability to control it. It is
also significant that he released the tape
to the video underground, not to the
established media. Guy has left his porta-
pak with the Panthers and we can ex-
pect to see more tapes from them in
the coming months.

Despite the absence of humor in most
sober--and lofty video raps, much of the
tape is plain funny. Humor is infectious
and perhaps needs no help from
communications theory.

Henri Bergson in his book Laughter
showed that the essence of humor lies in
the presentation of the human as the
mechanical—making a person come off
as a machine. (Hence Charlie Chaplin,
etc.) Video is really good at doing that:
All the awkwardness of spontaneity is
captured. An uncanny resemblance to
Smokey the Bear is immortalizedby
Freex head; or the androgynous con-
fusion of Jackie Curtis is captured, in
a similarly mind-blowing way, in his/
her rendition (donning ostrich feathers
and flexing muscles) of “My Sweet Old
English Rose.” Television understood
very early the potential for video
comedy. (Remember Ernie Kovacs?)
But it soon forgot.

Outside of production, there is a whole
other aspect of video—dissemination, and
the major outlets will apparently be
cable TV and video cassette, at least for
the time being. (Satellite broadcast will
eventually provide unlimited channel ca-
pability.)

Cable, as of April Ist, will be required
by the FCC to originate local program-
ing, providing some opportunity for
video artists to air their work in cable-
supplied communities. If, as FCC offici-
als have recommended, cable systems are
declared “common carriers,” on the
model of Bell Telephone, they will be
required to lease time to anyone and
everyone who wants it.

In any case, most video artists are
not worried about the market. As Art
Ginsberg says, “Video will flourish by
producing tapes. Don't worry about the
market. Have video images. Think video
events; video happenings. Take the equip-
ment there and do them.”

Despite the vicissitudes of life and
strife in the video community, largely
centering around unfair evil money, a
community “spirit” does still exist.
Raindance, Freex and People's Video
have gotten together to put on a joint
program Saturday nights, and at just
about every studio or loft in town, calls
keep pouring in from other video artists.
Will it survive success? Will it survive
fame? A whole new generation of
communication has been given to the
people. It is up to the people to use it.