HALF-INCH VIDEO TAPE RIGS SELLING FOR ABOUT $1500, first introduced to the U.S. market by Japanese manufacturers as expensive toys for the home movie buff, are having a profound effect on all types of non-theatrical film-making in New York. The other day two of us from New York University’s Alternate Media Center making programmes for Cable Television met some (red) Indians in front of the Museum of Natural History, shot for an hour and looked at our ‘answer print’ on the subway going home. It was played back via the same 3 lb. camera and 18 lb. deck we used to record it. No lab work was needed; no synchronisation of picture and sound. We edited in the camera.

Half-incher videotape, George C. Stoney

Had this been hot news we could have shown it on the air in minutes. We could have played it back on the spot, giving the Indians themselves the assurance that we were ‘telling it like it is’, a not inconsiderable advantage in these days of up-tight minorities. We could have erased it and recorded again, using the same $16 roll of tape.

With a minimum of training the Indians could have made their own show, and a lot of people will be doing just that as cable TV with its multiple channel capability, spreads across the country. Already there are cable systems operating in every major trading area, where some eight to ten up to a dozen TV channels snatched from the air by a cable company’s tall community antenna. In many places they also get more old time movies, an automatic clock and weather report scanner which also carries public notices, and anything else the operator can get for little or no money that might please his subscribers and fill the several extra channels most systems provide.

We’ve come a long way since Housing Problems, that admirable British documentary made in the 1930s, gave a few slum dwellers a chance to speak for themselves despite the domination of a monster 35mm camera, a professional crew and a director fresh from the other side of town. Those of us who have spent the years between trying to find a simpler, less threatening way to introduce viewers to the viewed, even viewers to themselves, find these new little mirror machines handy stuff. We are willing to put up with limitations in editing capability, can accept the small screen size until a projection system is developed, and grow impatient with television engineers who tell us our half-inch tapes can never be relied on to produce a signal of professional quality and stability on the home set.

We reply, ‘Maybe not . . . not yet . . .’ squeezing away what may be major prob-

I first met videotape, the two-inch variety now standard in TV studios, back in the late 1950s, when the New York Screen Directors’ Guild persuaded its members to come to classes by telling us ‘this machine will make film obsolete in ten years time’. Well, Guild members are still shooting a lot of film, most of it to be transferred to videotape before broadcast. Despite all the advantages inherent in tape, manufacturers of professional equipment have never built systems that are truly portable. Even the smaller equipment with one-inch tape looks like, and must be operated like, the heavy, pedestal-bound electronic cameras that determined TV studio production styles three decades ago. It is as if the 1972 automobiles were still being designed as horseless carriages. Union regulations and operating procedures have remained equally rigid. So the hand-held 16mm camera became the instrument of choice for all of us who wanted to get a little closer to reality with our documentaries for the small screen. This meant we were carrying 28 pounds of camera on our shoulders. We were tied by wire to a sound man who had his own burden of equipment to lug about. Between the ‘take’ and our answer print we had the lab, the sound transfer studio, and all the chores of synchronising, editing, negative cutting and more lab work which we had come to accept as inescapable parts of film-making. For too many of us these chores became the most important part of the job. We let them, and the professional attitudes and practices inherited from 35mm studio feature production, distance us from the people we were making films about. By and large, the people in front of the small camera held by a documentary film-maker today have little more chance to express themselves honestly and freely than they did in the 30s when Housing Problems seemed such a breakthrough.

I first met half-inch videotape at the National Film Board of Canada in 1968, when I left the U.S. for a two-year stint as guest Executive Producer for Challenge for Change, a programme designed to use film as a catalyst in various social programmes to improve the lot of Indians, poor fishermen, mothers on welfare. John Kemeny, the programme’s founder and Colin Low, a brilliant film-maker and social philosopher long at the Board, had already done enough by the time I was on the scene to prove that, with care and patience and the right choice of film-makers plus the expenditure of a great deal of money, film could and did have a considerable effect ‘as an agent for social change’. What was needed, obviously, was a faster, cheaper means to do the job if the technique was to be applied on a broad scale. Most important, we had to find some way for the people to take more of a hand in the film-making themselves.

The two women who persuaded us to launch our first community videotape project were no ordinary film-makers. Dorothy Henaut and Bonnie Klein brought to the task a philosophy about democratic participa-
way editorial decisions are made. It is largely their concept, their way of working, which guides social animators, teachers and community leaders generally who are now applying Challenge for Change techniques across Canada.

The advantages of videotape for immediate playback to small groups were soon obvious to even the most resistant filmmaker at NFB; and most professional filmmakers are simply appalled at the whole idea of half-inch video. Nothing that easy to operate can possibly be of much worth. Distribution staff members were equally sceptical. Without a direct means of projection, what good is it for a larger audience? they asked. It had taken them 30 years to make the 16mm. projector standard equipment in schools and village halls. Now we were asking them to begin an entirely new kind of distribution of an entirely new kind of reel that would require an entirely new kind of machine for playback. They were thinking in film terms, of course, not realising that the cheapness of tape made production for purely local use an affordable way to go. They were also denying the fact that the TV way of distributing non-theatrical films for that larger audience had been made all but obsolete ten years before by the spread of TV.

Cable TV in Canada developed much more rapidly than in the U.S., largely because of geography and the distance between settlements. Many merchants put up community antennae because their customers couldn't get a decent signal unless this service was provided along with the set they bought. For a long time almost no one utilised the capacity these community antenna systems had for originating broadcasts themselves. But with some prodding by National Film Board representatives and local community leaders, a good many system owners were found willing to let their facilities be used by Challenge for Change. A series of community experiments was launched, using half-inch video as the basic tool, often augmented by 'live' programmes and film.

Today most of these community efforts are still modest ones, conducted by volunteers and backed by a National Film Board distribution field representative or a social animator hired by a university or government agency. The most successful have been in rural communities where difficulties of 'on air' reception often boost cable subscription to 80-90% of set owners, a not uncommon situation in many parts of North America. (Hilly West Virginia, the poorest state in the Union, is also the most heavily cabled, with over 60% of households subscribing.) Little money has come from the cable operators to support these efforts. They are so accustomed to filling their multiple channels with programmes pulled out of the air at no cost that they seem to regard free programming as a divine right.

A major effort to tap the cable operators' pockets for programme support was backed by the National Film Board in Thunder Bay, Ontario, two years ago when that community's cable licence was up for renewal by CRTC, Canada's regulatory body for broadcasting. 'Town Talk', a local organisation of civic-minded people, wanted to take over the management of one cable channel, much programmes for it would be paid for by the effort at the rate of one dollar a month plus a $6 a month fee collected by the cable company.

The National Film Board spent a good deal of time and money to train the Town Talk people as film and videotape makers. They learned to edit their tapes up to a half-inch for more film-like cutting and greater stability of picture. In a surprisingly short time they were turning out programmes of professional quality without losing their local flavour. They won a large audience for their work throughout the viewing area. But they lost the battle. The cable company strongly backed by their national association fought the idea of giving up either control of programme content or the right to keep the money it collected. The CRTC, despite considerable public pressure from all over Canada to set a different precedent for community cable use, sided with the industry.

The FCC, the American equivalent of Canada's CRTC, has been equally dominated by the broadcasting industry. In fact Cable TV itself has suffered as many more arbitrary curbs are put on its community-serving potential by this agency. Now there is a strong possibility that the engineers at the FCC will decide to make illegal to put half-inch videotape on Cable TV as it is now illegal to use half-inch on regular TV. The present half-inch system delivers only 310 lines of information and the American 'on air' legal minimum is 52 lines. But when the signal is carried by cable the quality is already guaranteed. Most home sets can't deliver more than the 310 lines the Japanese have chosen as their standard in any case.

It is the word 'Japanese' in that last sentence that is the tip-off. Practically all half-inch equipment available in the U.S. is of Japanese manufacture. Even Ampex, the U.S. manufacturer which dominates the professional studio equipment field, has opted to distribute Japanese-made half-inch equipment instead of making its own. Now if the Japanese start nudging the American makers of studio equipment with their home-type gadgets there could be trouble ahead. Far easier to block this with a simple government regulation saying 'no half-inch on Cable because it's sub-standard' than meet the competition of the market-place.

And many a cable operator is ready to welcome such a decision as a way to avoid trouble without taking sides. As one of them remarked to me recently; 'What place has local politics got on an entertainment medium anytime? After all, we're guests in people's living rooms.'

This is not to say that every cable operator's office is being stormed by citizens hungry for access to the airwaves. Teleprompter, the nation's largest conglomerate with 212 franchises, is probably reflecting the dominant public mood in its current advertisements reading: CABLE TV—The world's greatest football receiver.
bar grows as rapidly as cable can be laid, for TV reception in this city of skyscrapers is
renowned capricious. Our Alternate Media Center in the School of the Arts at New
York University is one of several makers of programmes now being shown. Funded by
the Markle Foundation to be a centre for experiments in community programming,
we have stuck to half-inch tape for the most part, feeling its price, its portability and its
ease of operation make whatever we do with it replicable in many places that couldn't
afford to operate with professional equipment.

Because channel accessibility is relatively easy, we have experimented with program-
mapping events on cable in 'real time'. For example, we telecast 33 hours of a commu-
nity school weekend when teachers, parents, architects and social scientists worked for
three days and nights to develop plans and strategies for an experimental school. We
put on 18 hours of material made at a confer-
ence at the NYU Law School on the
rights of minors, at which we recorded a
running commentary on, and reactions to,
the adult-dominated panels as seen by the
kids themselves.

Normal TV could have done these pro-
grammes with remote hook-ups, but at a
cost only such mass-approved spectacles as
football games can attract advertisers to support. A brief summary is all most news
editors would give them, quite enough for
most viewers. But for people who would
like to be present, or whom the event's
sponsors would like to attract, such potted
versions are no substitute. For such events
we use the half-inch tape, simply bicycling
it to the cable's control room on a two-hour
delay.

We are also developing weekly tapes with and about people in selected neighbour-
hoods where there is a concentration of cable
subscribers. Poor people subscribe to cable quite as readily as do the affluent, it would seem.
For the price of two tickets to the movies
down town you can see a choice of eight or
ten movies every day of the month on your
cable hook-up, and you don't have to 'get
a baby-sitter or risk your life on the streets
to get there', as cable operators have not
hesitated to emphasise, playing up the para-
noia most New Yorkers suffer from these
days.

Interestingly enough, it is just this prob-
lem—the mistrust of one New Yorker for
another—that has been the dominant social
concern of most of our tapes to date. Our
approach, as developed by Red Burns and
Jackie Park, two Canadian women long
resident in the U.S. but still imbued
with that country's extraordinary respect for
community, has been to record people's lives
and concerns with relatively little stress on
issues.

'Video portraits' might be a good term to
use for tapes our young film-makers come
back with at first. Slowly they get to know
their chosen neighbourhood. The people in
it watch 'Channel C' on the cable and come
to trust the film-makers for not manipulating
the news for entertainment value. They gain
self-respect as they keep seeing themselves
and each other on a medium usually reserved
for the famous or infamous. In time they
come to speak more honestly, less defen-
sively, about what concerns them most.

I have seen much the same technique at
work in a remote mining town in Alberta and
in the hills of Tennessee. New York is not
the only place where such walls exist. This
is a nation so dominated by commercial
formula TV that 'live' entertainment, even
good conversation, is often hard to find. A
friend told me of a recent visit to his home
town in the Middle West. Gone were the
long summer evenings when grandparents,
parents and children filled the front porches
with songs, games and talk. Now, he said,
the porches are deserted. The streets are
quiet. Almost everyone is inside watching
TV, each age group clustered around a
different set, hypnotised by their own pre-
ferred brand of commercial entertainment.
One more reason for all this effort we are
making, then, is to see if TV can be turned
into a stimulus for action as well as repose.
Our goal is to get people involved, to get
them to turn off their sets and join the living.

It should be stated in conclusion that the
half-inch videotape scene in the U.S.,

Videotape camera at a rock concert in Charleston; and (below right) a 'Challenge for Change' pro-
gramme in which a pub owner in Alberta films his customers.