media activism as a tool for building communities

We live in a highly mediated age. We’ve been brought up on well edited and engaging text and images. Be it print, radio or video – media is a craft tailored to be convincing. It makes it easy to mutate reality. If we don’t tell our own stories then we risk leaving others to create conflicting versions which will be the only ones that resonate. Building our own media has become increasingly easy with recent technologies. Free software such as Linux and Mozilla can be seen to embody mutual aid, WIKI and open posting websites break down hierarchies of communication. Indymedia allows everyone to make their own news, while blogs (web logs) encourage reflection of our place in the world and free expression. Collaborative media projects can also be a good way of building trust and working together on a unified aim and are an action in themselves. This chapter looks at a few different tools (community newsletters, spoof newspapers, participatory video, community film screenings) that are used regularly by people to create their own media.

how to set up a community newsletter

Starting up a local newsletter is something that can get lots of people together working collectively and learning about local issues. The guide below is adapted from the PorkBolter, a successful radical news sheet based in Worthing in the UK.

Stage one: Organise a meeting

You’ve talked about it down the pub with a few mates. You all think it’s a great idea. So just get on with it. Fix a date, time and venue. Leave other possibilities wide open. It’s important for everyone to have had a say in the shaping of the project from the start.
how to communicate beyond tv

Stage two: Get it all sorted
Make sure you agree some things – a name and address, which will in turn enable you to set up a bank account in your newsletter’s name. For the name, the main requirements are that it should have a local reference and that it shouldn’t be too overtly political – you are addressing ordinary people.

Stage three: The details
You’ve also got to start thinking about boring details, like size, frequency, number and so on. You’d be amazed at how much you can fit on a double-sided piece of paper. As far as frequency is concerned, once a month seems about right for many. Quantity is obviously limited by funds. Try getting 500 done to start with, then 1000 if your distribution is working.

Stage four: Printing
Cheap photocopying or printing is hard to come by, but very useful. Don’t just rush out to the nearest High Street print shop. Try your local student union or college print department or local resource centre. If all else fails, appeal to readers for information.

Stage five: Paying for it
You’ll probably find yourselves fulfilling this role. But spread between the group members it doesn’t come to much. If you meet at someone’s home instead of in the pub, you’ll probably have saved enough for the next issue. Other costs may well be covered by donations or subscriptions.

Stage six: Getting it out
Distribution is easy when it’s free. It’s just a question of getting the newsletters all out locally. You can do that by standing in the town centre and thrusting them into people’s hands or leaving them in the library and town hall, and in shops and pubs. People should also be able to subscribe for a small charge to cover postage.

Stage seven: Contents
What do you put in the bloody thing? First of all you read all the mainstream local papers. And then you get very angry with all the stuff the council’s up to. Cut out the relevant bits and bring them along to the next newsletter meeting. Someone writes down the best bits and the contents start to emerge. Add in your own little campaigns (anti-GM,
anti-CCTV, anti-negative attitudes, etc.) plus titbits about worthy local groups and you’ve got a newsletter.

**Stage eight: Campaigns and keeping it local**

Trying to persuade people that global capitalism is a bad thing because it is destroying the Amazon rainforests is a waste of time. But talk to people about the way that money-grabbing property developers are allowed to build all over green spaces on the edge of your town and your readers will understand why you call for an end to the rule of greed and money over people. In your newsletter your views can clearly be seen as common sense. You are normal and the council or property developers or government are the outsiders – reversing the way radical views are conventionally presented.

**Stage nine: Have a laugh**

A jokey approach makes people read your newsletter and explodes certain ill-founded stereotypes about radical political initiatives. Could be a problem, though, if your group does in fact happen to be entirely composed of humourless left-wing gits.

**Stage ten: Law abiding**

Remember that you can get done for libel if you make certain claims about individuals. Get round this with humourous digs and heavy use of satire and sarcasm (think *Private Eye*, Michael Moore). It is worth knowing that you cannot libel a council – so go for it!

**Stage eleven: Carry on publishing**

There will be ups and downs. New people will join your circle. Others will drift away. It might seem like nobody’s taking any notice of you at all. But in fact your message will be permeating the very fabric of your community. It’s got to be worth it.

**spoof newspapers**

Since April 1997 when a 20,000 print run of *Evading Standards*, a skit on London’s *Evening Standard* was published for a march in support of the Liverpool dockers, the mockery idea has spawned its own imitators worldwide. That original issue was seized in bulk by police and three people were charged with incitement to affray. But the spoofers sued the Metropolitan Police for wrongful arrest and were awarded five-figure costs. The money funded the next edition, and *Evading Standards* made a return for a demonstration in the City of London. Publishing alternative newspapers is an
Figure 16.1  Bristle: Bristol’s local monthly magazine
The Hate Mail was created by the Manchester No Borders Group. Our aim with this publication was to create a publication that contained our views on immigration law in an accessible format. We wanted something that we could give out to the general public about the violence and inhumane treatment of people in the asylum system. We wanted to help widen the spectrum of acceptable debate on immigration issues. Campaigning to achieve leave to stay on compassionate grounds is not a radical stance.

Together we worked out the ideas we wanted to communicate and divided them up. When the group was happy with the ideas we set a word limit for each article and we went away to complete it. Most main articles were written with some kind of image in mind. The artwork and layout and the final editing were specialised roles taken on by one or two people. A tabloid publication is relatively cheap per issue to print when you get above a certain number. It is suitable when you have a message that you want to get out to tens of thousands of people. You need a network of volunteers that are prepared to go and give it out. In this case we contacted members of autonomous social centres, resource centres and housing co-ops and found out how many hundred they would commit to giving out before printing.

Tabloid coverage of some issues relating to asylum and refugees is so extreme that to create a spoof of it became quite difficult. So we made the decision to include dark and twisted humour designed to shock. The front cover headline read: ‘Asylum Seekers Ate My Hamster’. We decided to make the first four pages funny before hitting home with our real message, an editorial, a ‘how you can help’ resource page and a myth-busting section called ‘You are being lied to about asylum seekers’. The editorial of the Hate Mail was as extremist and simplistic as tabloid editorials:

WE KNOW that this island is blighted by irresponsible media reporting that has a TERRIBLE and lasting impact on community relations...WE BELIEVE in freedom of movement for all people on this planet. We believe that all humans have the right to decide where they want to live and who to fall in love with.
attempt by campaigners to bypass the mainstream media and deliver their message directly by imitating the style and layout of well known and recognisable newspapers. Other recent spoofs have included Shitty Life, the Newcastle Evening Chronicle and the Financial Crimes.

When the concept crossed the Atlantic, the game moved on. Protesters against the World Trade Organisation produced a quality copy of the awkwardly named Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Squads of early morning paperboys and girls simply opened up the street boxes with a quarter, replaced the outer four pages and put them back. They were attacked in an angry editorial the next day. The San Francisco Chomical used the same technique to highlight the incarceration on death row of black activist and writer Mumia Abu-Jamal.

One such spoof newspaper that was circulated in the UK in 2005 was called the Hate Mail (2005). This paper spoofed the often misleading coverage of refugees and asylum seekers by the right-wing press in the UK.

Creating a spoof newspaper – checklist:

✓ Decide on the communication objective: What is the theme and message?
✓ Make sure it is clear who the target audience is: If you’re speaking to kids, then your language and arguments will have to be understandable to kids.
✓ Decide on format: Is it going to be a magazine, newspaper or leaflet? Make this decision based on the target audience you’re trying to reach and the amount of money available.
✓ Decide on concept: The concept is the underlying creative idea that drives your message.
✓ The visuals: Though you don’t absolutely require a visual, it will help draw attention to your ad. Research indicates that 70 per cent of people will only look at the visual in an ad, whereas only 30 per cent will read the headline.
✓ The headline: Your headline must be short, snappy and must touch the people that read it. Your headline must affect the reader emotionally, either by making them laugh, angry, curious or think. If you can’t think of a headline that does one of these four things, then keep thinking.
✓ Distribution: Decide on distribution channels and make sure they are ready to go. Be aware that the police have in the past ceased spoof papers. It may be worth dividing the papers up around different locations.
In the past we've brought you many unbelievable stories about foreigners assaulting the British way of life - today is no exception.

ASYLUM SEEKER ATE MY HAMSTER

by Felix Marus

Reports have come in that the level of asylum lunacy to new heights of car-bursting irritation. Our sources have revealed that ever-hungry border-hoppers have been eating hamsters. Animal lovers and medical experts are equally outraged. The British hamster is rightly renowned as one of the finest examples of pedigree rodents worldwide. Have generations of ordinarilys eccentric English pet lovers created a truly pedigree species only for it to be scoffed by benefit claimants? These perverts mini-thoroughbreds, run up what it is to be a proud member of the Royal Rabbits. But now, the lovable creatures are at risk from the human vermin who, one-by-one, gobbles away in the unprocessors' bowls of decency.

INSIDE: You Are Being Lied To 8, Hate Apathy 4, Hate Opinion 5, Hate Life 9, Hate TV 10, Hate Yourself

Figure 16.2 The Hate Mail spoof newspaper
You come with preconceived shots and ask me ‘what are you doing today? I want to film you’. I get worried, not knowing what happens to what I say. I speak in my language; you write in your language and make your film in your language. If I see your film, I feel, I never meant this. Only you educated people have the chance to own and control media. You advertise sprayers, pesticide, toothbrushes and fertilizers. Whatever you produce, you have the right to show as long as you desire. When we, the hardworking people, want a media of our own, you tell us that we cannot have one. We also want to show our issues and problems. Some of you must start thinking about us and give us the right to own our own media.

(Chinna Narsamma, a dalit woman in the village of Pastapur, Andra Pradesh, India explaining why she and her sangham group of women now make their own videos)

Participatory video (PV) is a term that was coined in the 1960s alongside Paulo Freire’s popular education. The point is to give a voice to people whose voices would not always be heard. PV could be defined as a scriptless video production process, directed by a group from the grassroots. It aims at creating video narratives that communicate what participants really want to communicate. Rather than making a documentary about an issue, the people directly involved in the situation make the video about themselves – from beginning to end. Participatory video has been used to great effect to give voice to the marginalised and unheard.

**Participatory video in a nutshell**

- Participants rapidly learn how to use video equipment through games and exercises.
- Facilitators help groups identify and analyse important issues in their community.
- Short videos and messages are directed and filmed by participants.
- Footage is shared with the wider community at screenings.
- It’s an excellent tool for public consultation, advocacy, policy dialogue, for mediation in conflicts, development projects and programmes.
- It can be used to communicate the outcome of all kinds of participatory assessments and processes, in all stages of the project cycle – planning, monitoring and evaluation.
It can be applied horizontally, for communicating between local communities, and vertically, for grassroots people communicating with policy makers, donors and government authorities.

With the help of voice-over translation it can be used to communicate across languages.

Where there is local television, PV can extend a local process of planning or consultation to wider populations.

Participatory interaction has several key objectives in building a video: to show people how to use a video camera; to learn video techniques; to build confidence both behind the scenes and in front of the camera; to build group dynamics; to explore different issues; and to learn to tell stories.

Box 16.2 The disappearing game

The game below from Insight Video can be used as part of a participatory video training programme.

Objectives: Have fun, group building, learn how to record and pause.

Numbers: 3+.

Duration: 10–20 minutes.

Materials: Video camera, TV monitor, tripod, AV (audio-visual) lead.

Stages

(a) The whole group of participants stands in a group as if posing for a photograph.

(b) Person A is filming and should ask the others to stand like statues and be silent. Try to be humorous (for example, standing in funny poses).

(c) Person A pushes the button and counts to three (records for 3 seconds). If the camera or tripod is moved, even slightly, the trick will be spoiled.

(d) Person A asks someone to leave the group—remember the others must not move.

(e) That new person then pushes record.

(f) When the last person is removed, film the empty space for 5 seconds.

(g) Now watch it immediately. It will look as if people appear and disappear as if by magic.
Films screenings are one way of getting together in the same room with a common purpose. There are plenty of reasons for creating a forum of people:

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**Box 16.3 How to storyboard**

Storyboarding is a way of setting out what is going to happen in your video. It’s useful to agree on the main theme or story before starting the storyboard.

**Objectives:** Develop participants’ confidence and control over the process, build group working skills, share roles, learn to tell a story with images.

**Numbers:** 2+

**Duration:** 1–3 hours.

**Materials:** Something to draw on, video camera, tripod, microphone, TV, AV lead.

**Stages**

(a) Talk to participants – find out what story they would like to tell. You can use creative activities to stimulate ideas if necessary. Ask them: ‘What would you like to make a short film about?’ Build their confidence, encourage and praise their ideas.

(b) Draw 4–6 boxes.

(c) Ask: ‘How would you introduce your story?’ Draw a sketch in the first box. Draw a simple image (stick figures, for example).

(d) Continue quite rapidly with the outline story – try to get participants to draw in the boxes themselves. Make sure everyone is involved.

(e) At the end go back and get details for every box: ‘Who is talking here?’ ‘Who is filming this shot?’ ‘Where will you film it?’

(f) Congratulate them.

(g) The group now goes to film the shots in the order laid out in the storyboard.

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Outreach for existing campaigns and projects and getting more people involved
• Air concerns and bring out debates on issues that affect a community
• Informal mediation and conflict prevention
• Create an atmosphere of inspiration and positive creativity.

Going beyond TV
Ideally video should be just one medium with which you engage with the audience. Live interviews, popular education, spoken word, audience comments, music, requests, heckling and corrections, announcements and earnest calls to action are the real flesh of a film screening night, and the fact that you are showing films just helps facilitates that. You can treat a screening as a show no matter how small it is. If you have put out a film screening flier and told people that it is about social change, you can see it as a duty to make it upbeat, intelligent and likely to make people active. You may be able to do that in the way films are introduced and the way people are asked to make announcements. People notice the spirit in which it is done and if you really care. Often that can be more influential than the content of the films themselves.

At screenings you can show and say things that just don’t get on mainstream TV. Here are some things that TV can’t do that public screenings can:
• Use video flexibly as a resource to stop the action to allow people to share emotions, and reactions, and form a response.
• Allow its viewers to make announcements of upcoming events as the screening progresses.
• Inspire people to become active in campaigns and action.
• Bring out debate in situations where it wouldn't normally happen.

How to put on a successful screening
Choose a venue with an audience in mind. These can include:
• Arts venues: They often have good technical support and the sound quality is good.
• Club/dance parties: Sometimes doing social justice films in these types of places can get lost in the chaos. If you keep your message clear, perform it well, and have really upbeat comedy and music based films it can work really well.
• Pub/bar/social club: There are certain videos that are so strong that they can compete with background noise, and work in pubs and bars. It’s good to
have a microphone and a pretty good PA, as people chatting in pubs make a surprisingly loud noise.

- Community centre/churches: These venues can be a bit cold. Try and create a warm vibe somehow.
- Pirate TV: Pirate TV stations in Italy download programmes from the internet and retransmit them via the airwaves. One tactic for getting more viewers is to flier the neighbourhood letting them know that the Street TV station will be retransmitting pay for view football matches for free – they show radical content at half time. Outrageous!
- Squatted venues: Often squatted venues give you the flexibility to provide an ideal screening environment. People often feel a good sense of ownership over the space and this can help people really respond to social change films.
- Cinemas: Sometimes independent cinemas let you use their facilities and you may be able to link something up with an existing festival.

**Promote the gig tactically and add performance into the mix**

Performance, live music and having a good time are a great way of getting the message across. Start up something new and try to get a buzz going. Get a popular local musician, DJ or VJ, poet or MC to come along. Make sure you know that there will be events in the lead up to your screening to give out fliers. You will normally find a lot of people who will play for a good cause. Choose DJs and musicians to suit the mood of what you are doing. Partner up with other events; try to involve other promoters too.

**Techniques to make screenings more stimulating, interactive and less formal**

- Stopping films and getting feedback
- Offering choices of what film to see next
- Having the films introduced by relevant people
- Q and A sessions with people who where involved in the film
- Plants in the audience to stimulate debate
- Using extracts of video for ‘what happened next’ role plays.

If you pull together a diverse range of people to watch it, then discussions can keep going for as long as the film itself. It might be good to make sure that someone with facilitation skills is there.
Choosing films with an audience and activity in mind
It can be a good idea to think of films to communicate a message to a specific group. Specifically targeted fliers, mail shots to email lists, and personal contact and announcements at events work well. You can work with groups to choose a video with a suitable social change message. Hopefully the group you are working with will have suitable activities and projects to promote at the screening.

Programming films
There are lots of different films that can be used as part of a schedule of a screening night:

- Short action films
- Unedited rushes (works well when you have someone to narrate it)
- Sections of longer films
- Longer films, well crafted films.

How to source videos for your screenings/video archive
Often if you are doing screenings you may be asked to come up with 30 minutes of films on a particular issue – privatisation, climate change or squat actions. This is made a lot easier if you have a large archive of films. This may take the form of a library of DVDs, CDs and VHS tapes. It may also involve having a hard drive full of digital films which have been downloaded from the internet or networked hand to hand. There are lots of places where you can get material.

Offline content

- Traditionally the best way to get good content for screening is to order VHS tapes and DVDs from mail order catalogues, or even get film prints delivered and hire out your local cinema (see www.culture shop.org).
- Film screeners now often tour with a DVD or their work which they screen and sell. They also send out copies to screeners that they can’t visit in person but who find out about their film through their touring.
- Hand to hand digital distribution has made it a lot quicker to network films suitable for activist screenings. It has become quite common for screeners to spend break times in activist gatherings frantically swapping digital video files and DVDs.
- ‘Ruff Cuts’ and the ‘European Newsreal’ are two projects which provide a high quality source of shorter action based films. These projects have produced between them 40 or so CDs of radical video content. The films are
all distributed under the ‘Copy-left license’, meaning they can be freely copied and passed on.

**Online content**  For a wealth of online content, see the resources at the end of this chapter.

**Some tips for good distribution**
You can also help to create a network of film screeners for your subject of interest by co-coordinating dates with other venues, doing joint publicity, pre-view copies, paying independent film makers and getting material in sympathetic shops.

**conclusions**

Since the advent of the internet and a reduction in costs of audio-visual equipment, producing our own media has become considerably easier. All of the ideas mentioned in this chapter are united in promoting media work based on freedom, co-operation, mutual aid, justice and solidarity. From community and neighbourhood campaigns, direct actions, grassroots mobilisations to critical analysis of the world we live in, building alternative and independent media gives us a voice with which to shout. Producing and disseminating our ideas, inspirations, news and creativity has an enormous potential role to play in constructing and renewing a sense of community. This chapter has contained a few ideas to get you started and the resources section will help you put your ideas into reality.

**Mick Fuzz** is a Manchester based media activist who has worked extensively with video and multimedia projects at community and international levels. He is co-founder of Beyond TV, a video documentary project and Clearer Channel, a web based video sharing project.

**resources**

**Books**

**Websites**

**Local newsletters**

- Bristle www.bristle.org.uk
- Haringey Newsletter www.haringey.org.uk
- Rough Music www.roughmusic.org.uk
- The Pork Bolter www.eco-action.org/porkbolter
- Walthamstow Underdog www.libcom.org/hosted/wag

**Participatory video**

- Carbon Trade Watch www.carbontradewatch.org/
- Insight www.insightshare.org/
- Raised Voices www.raised-voices.org.uk/

**Video/media resources**

- Beyond TV www.beyonDTV.org
- Clearer Channel http://clearerchannel.org
- Creating Online Video http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Video
- Culture Shop www.cultureshop.org
- Digital Video Archive www.ngvision.org
- Engage Media – Australia http://engagemedia.org
- Eyes on IFI www.ifiwatchnet.org/eyes
- Indymedia Translation Project http://translations.indymedia.org
- Online News Archive www.chomskytorrents.org
how to communicate beyond tv

Online Video Producers www.transmission.cc
Open Source Internet TV www.getdemocracy.com
Our Video Toolkit www.ourvideo.org
Undercurrents Video Collective www.undercurrents.org
Video Indymedia http://video.indymedia.org
Video Syndication Network http://v2v.cc
Video/Image/Text archive www.archive.org

**Independent media/news**
Alternative Press Index www.altpress.org
Global Indymedia Network www.indymedia.org
Indymedia Documentation Project docs.indymedia.org
LibCom www.libcom.org
Melbourne Based Community Radio Station www.3cr.org.au
Schnews Direct Action Newsheet www.schnews.org.uk
UK Based Spotlight on Corporate Distortions of Mainstream Media www.medialens.org
US Based Alternative Press Index www.altpress.org
US Based Centre for Media and Democracy www.prwatch.org
Znet www.zmag.org (Huge archive of radical news and analysis.)

**Open source/publishing**
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