

Steal this Station: the Videofreex and Radical Banality of Pirate Broadcasting (A Review of “Here Come the Videofreex by Jenny Rasking and John Nealon.)

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ABSTRACT

In this review of the 2015 documentary, *Here Come the Videofreex*, the author questions Rasking and Nealon’s choice of a traditional chronological approach to a discussion of the importance of the Videofreex, particularly to our contemporary understanding of citizen journalism and the ubiquity of cameras in everyone’s back pocket. Instead, Paulsen asks questions about the importance of the Videofreex self-removal from mainstream media to rural New York and their relationship to other radical video collectives of the time.



Figure 1. *The Videofreex. C. 1971. Courtesy of Videofreex.*

In 1970, Abbie Hoffman, still fresh from his conviction in the Chicago 8 trial for intent to riot, solicited the help of a group of experimental videomakers, the Videofreex. He was writing “Steal This Book,” a Yippee manifesto-cum-manual that contained instructions on how to “live free” by gleaning or stealing food, shelter, medical care, telephone calls, and dope, as well as directions for liberating the structures of power from the hands of governments and corporations. [1] One of the primary targets of Hoffman’s attack would be the centralized television networks, and for this he needed the advice of the Videofreex, who had spent the previous two years learning the ins and outs of the new medium. The first consumer video recorders appeared 1965, but it wasn’t until 1967, with the release of the first fully portable cameras, that video would come to revolutionize the media landscape in the United States. When Hoffman began writing, few people, let alone the author himself, knew much about the technology. He asked the Videofreex to help him draft the chapter on “Guerrilla Broadcasting,” which described how to establish a “people’s TV network” by illegally tapping into cable antennas and pirate broadcasting on the airwaves. [2] After concluding their work on the book, Hoffman pushed the artists to put their research into action by bankrolling the construction of a guerrilla media van, outfitted with a mobile television transmitter that would contaminate the airwaves with pirate television signals. Hoffman imagined them driving around New York City, broadcasting from the back of the van, blanketing each block with their signal and radical content. The Videofreex, however, were never able to actualize Hoffman’s dream of an operational mobile transmitter. After several unsuccessful attempts to mobile broadcast, most notably at the 1971 May Day rally in Washington D.C., they gave up the dream of a guerrilla video “hit and run” and put down permanent roots in the small rural town of Lanesville, New York. Those roots included a transmitter and antenna that did, as Hoffman had dreamed, black out all other television signals in the area.

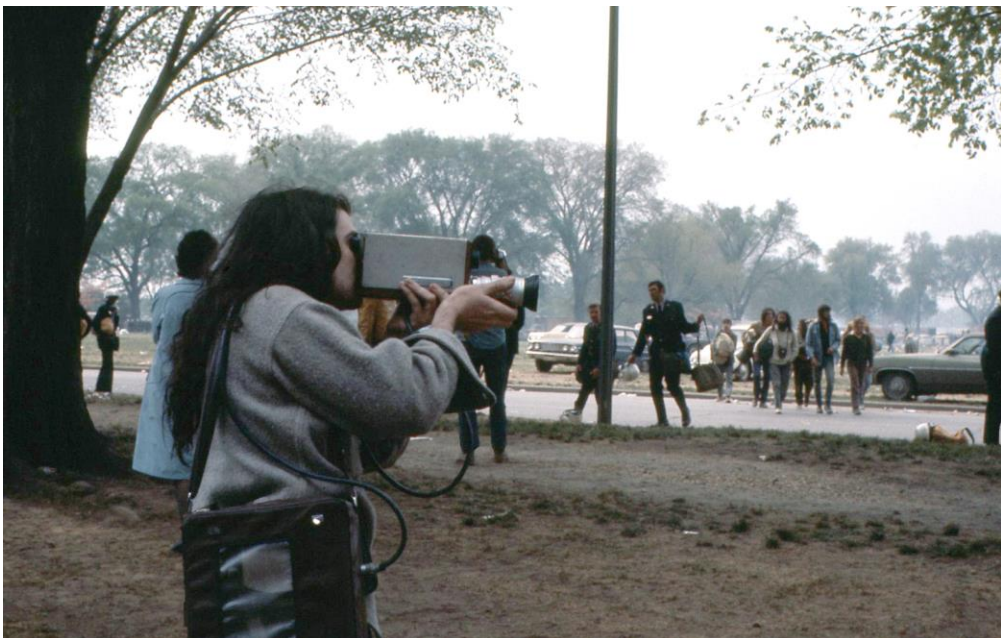


Figure 2. David Cort at May Day protest, Washington DC, 1971. Courtesy of Videofreex

A brief bit of this story appears in Jenny Raskin and Jon Nealon's 2015 documentary, *Here Come the Videofreex*. Raskin and Nealon's film is a strictly chronological, evenhanded account of the Videofreex's history as a collective and their crucial role as imbedded documentarians of American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The viewer follows the lifeline of the group from their synergistic first meetings to their slow dissolution, regularly appraised by nostalgic retrospection on times of passion and urgency. The group came into being by a chance meeting of David Cort and Parry Teasdale at the 1969 Woodstock Festival. Both men were surprised by the sight of another attendee with a video camera, and they soon joined forces and collected other collaborators. Working together under the name Videofreex, Skip Blumburg, Mary Curtis Ratcliff, Bart Friedman, Nancy Cain, Davidson Gigilotti, Chuck Kennedy, Carol Vontobel, and Ann Woodward became an ad hoc news team reporting the center of a cultural revolution. *Here Comes the Videofreex* provides a glimpse into their enormous and unwieldy archive: from bad trips at Woodstock, to intimate interviews with Hoffman during the Chicago 8 trial and Black Panther Fred Hampton just weeks before his murder, footage of protesters of the 1971 May Day protests from *inside* the DC lockup, to bits of yoga, hippy erotica, and happenings. The documentary chronicles the changing landscape of news reporting and the cultural politics that demanded alternative forms of production, delivery and distribution. Their tapes, now covered in mold and in desperate need of preservation, provide an unparalleled glimpse into the youth culture and activist politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The Videofreex, the documentary argues, pictured a then-unimagined future when everyone would always have a video camera in the palm of their hand or back pocket.



Figure 3. Parry Teasdale photographs May Day protest, 1971. Courtesy of Videofreex

The filmmakers end with a montage of more contemporary clips of citizen surveillance, from the Rodney King video to cellphone images of protests, riots, and police brutality, intercut with more

banal bits of everyday life from vlogs and Youtube posts. The conclusion, spoken in the last moments of the film, is that “We are all [now] Videofreex.” Surely they are right; we live in a new age of citizen journalism that requires bottom up coverage for our own rights and protection. But to sum up the Videofreex’s career as simply the first people to think of recording everything, or mere heralds of a wired and remediated future is to miss the profound arguments lodged in their decision to move from the center of the cultural and video revolutions in New York City to the hinterland fringes, where there was no TV reception, let alone an art world or countercultural public. Ultimately, the strict year-by-year account of the Videofreex work puts emphasis on the content of the early tapes the Videofreex made, rather than on the radicality of their larger gestures, and their innovations in infrastructure and audience, which are lost or at least emptied of transformative potential.



Figure 4. “Feedback” Radical Software 1.1 (Spring 1970): 19. Copyright Radical Software. Available in the Radical Software Online Archive, Daniel Langlois Foundation, http://www.radicalsoftware.org/volume1nr1/pdf/VOLUME1NR1_art05.pdf

Raskin and Nealon position the Videofreex as archetypes of their generation and harbingers of the next one. Prescient as the Videofreex may have been, this leveled narrative drains their specific potency, especially compared to the other guerrilla video collectives of their day as well as social media networks of the present. Like the other guerilla video groups of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Raindance, Video Free America, Global Village, TVTV, and Electric Eye, the Videofreex documented the world around them and sought distribution on networks, cable, in video theaters, or through the post (as enabled through the “Cultural Data Bank” mail order information in the back of the movement’s magazine *Radical Software*.) [3] But the Videofreex’s move off the grid and away from the excitement and energy of the city coincided with a profound shift in their

work, its content, audience, and distribution. Any of the other collectives could have been equal heralds (if not better, in the case of Raindance or TVTV) of our always mediated, distributed, and increasingly corporatized present. The most surprising, and ultimately most radical gestures the Videofreex made shifted away from political and experimental content and let go hope for a broad audience across a large network. Instead they focused on the local – and even the banal – to rethink how we get our information and who authors it.



Figure 5. “Cultural Data Bank” Radical Software 1.2 (Autumn 1970): 19-20. Copyright Radical Software. Available in the Radical Software Online Archive, Daniel Langlois Foundation, http://www.radicalsoftware.org/volume1nr2/pdf/VOLUME1NR2_art02.pdf

Soon after forming, Videofreex began their careers working on a pilot news program for CBS, “Subject to Change,” intended to provide the mainstream audiences a spectacle of youth culture, alternative lifestyles, leftist politics, and “the real world.” [4] The experiment was an utter failure in the eyes of the network, and the startling, remarkable tapes – of Hoffman, Hampton, protests, riots, and youthful revolt – never made it on the air. The venture, however, left the Videofreex flush with equipment and nervous about future corporate connections. They had amassed a catalog of hundreds of tapes, but had nowhere to show them, not on CBS and not on Hoffman’s guerrilla airwaves. After struggling to find an audience and pay the bills, they followed state arts funding out of the city to a farm in upstate New York, where they continued to make tapes off the grid. While upstate, they ran workshops teaching kids how to use video, and eventually enlisting all of the residents of the small town of Lanesville in making a local pirate broadcast station. For nearly five years (March 1972 – February 1977) the Videofreex went on the air twice a week with a completely illegal, community produced news and variety show.

In the early days, they broadcast whenever they wished, bucking traditional timeslots and formats. They showed tapes from their archive and new aesthetic experiments, but quickly began producing new and audience-specific content with the local community: tapes of things happening in

Lanesville, interviews with towns people, kids horsing around, and local tragedies, such as fires or car accidents. The Videofreex even scripted more conventional television dramas with residents cast in many of the parts, such as “Bart’s Cowboy Show.” During the live transmissions, neighbors would come down to the Videofreex house to appear on the show or call in to report about problems with the reception, and in some cases, when unsuspecting visitors were passing through town, to inquire about their license. [5]. Later they would settle on regular Sunday and Wednesday prime time broadcasts to the community, which was waiting to see themselves on the screen. The Videofreex combined rather tame content with a renegade delivery system – hijacked commercial airwaves distributing content that could not be monetized or sold to any larger public. Moreover, for a few hours a week, they convinced a conservative small town to let go of commercial television and to embrace a totally illegal pirate television station that was for – but not marketed to – them.

It’s here that the distinct differences between Videofreex and the other guerrilla collectives, and between what they did and the current state of social media, become most distinct and important. The Videofreex, in many ways, traveled a path opposite comparable groups. They began with a failed corporate television collaboration, and further recoiled from the mass media and wide distribution to hyper-local analog narrowcasting. Other collectives, like Raindance spinoff TVTV, took another route, from total independence and quasi-militant agitation to increasingly high profile collaborations with network and cable television stations, with members breaking off for Hollywood careers. [6] The Videofreex’s early and sobering encounter with the big money of network TV seemed to put them on a path toward the local rather than the global, toward a gift economy, rather than chasing any sort of fame or market.

The Videofreex’s turn toward more mild fare produced static in other parts of the guerrilla video community. One might have thought that their commitment to pirate broadcasting and hijacked airwaves would continue to legitimize their activist identity despite the change in content and audience. Prominent makers in the field, however, often lashed out at the Videofreex’s project, assumedly over their regular securing of grant money for rural workshops. Allen Rucker, of Media Access Center, and Hudson Marquez, of Ant Farm complained that funds were being wasted on “people hanging out in the woods being hippies and taping old guys in their house” or “taping [some] old guy down by the fire house.” [7] The Videofreex’s broadcasts may have been aimed at a small and not very hip community, but their work did end up benefiting the entire country. At the end of their stint as pirate broadcasters, Parry Teasdale was tapped by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to propose a way of making low-power “micro” TV services legal. In their five-year stand-off with the FCC, it was the government that, as Teasdale puts it, “blinked first,” and the Videofreex formalized a kind of squatters’ rights for TV pirates. [8]

The documentary’s comparison of the Videofreex work and their establishment of an alternative distribution network to the excessively monetized, surveilled, and corporate websites like YouTube or social media sites is easy but disappointing. For what the Videofreex modeled was a network outside corporations, outside control, outside the influence of the markets or monolithic popular culture. In the pages of *Steal this Book*, Hoffman and Teasdale write, “In no area of the country are all [the TV] channels used. This raises important political questions as to why people do not have the right to broadcast on unused channels.... Guerrilla TV is the vanguard of the communications revolution.... One pirate picture on the sets in Amerika’s [sic] living rooms is worth a thousand wasted words.” [9] It is not the content that makes a work political; it is the medium and the mode of communication. The web gives us the illusion of freedom while luring

us into a control society. The Videofreex were carving out a place – if only for a few hours a week – that was an alternative to such logic.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Parry Teasdale, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective that Turned It On* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 1999), 29.
2. Abbie Hoffman, *Steal This Book* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1996), 139-145.
3. For a discussion of the guerrilla video tape exchange network see my article: Kris Paulsen, "Half-Inch Revolution: The Guerrilla Video Tape Network," *Amodern 2* (Fall 2013). <http://amodern.net/article/half-inch-revolution/>
4. Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.
5. Teasdale, 78.
6. Raindance founder and TVTV figurehead, Michael Shamberg, for example, moved from video activist to cable and later Hollywood producer. For a critical overview of his career and the politics of reaching a broader audience, see David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 87-113.
7. Boyle, 87.
8. Teasdale, 210. The document Teasdale produced for the FCC is titled, "A Micro-TV Service in the United States."
9. Hoffman, 142-144.

AUTHOR BIO

Kris Paulsen is Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Art and Film Studies Program at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH. Her first book, *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface*, was published by the MIT Press on the Leonardo Book Series in 2017.