

## The Video Recorder in Developing Countries<sup>1</sup>

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Judging from what the international mass media say, there is no other sector today more prone to revolution than the communication sector. Since the turn of the century, rapid advances in technology have apparently been setting off a whole string of them. The video revolution only happens to be the latest.

With every new communication technology developed, the benefits for education and human advancement are hopefully predicted. So far, however, the gains have truly been revolutionary only in entertainment and in commerce. Perhaps that is because the push to bring down the cost of each technology to the buying range of the mass market invariably comes hardest from big business - with an eye to the lucrative returns from entertainment and commercial applications. This was true with television as it is now also true with the video recorder. Small wonder then that the impact of both should be most marked and most resounding in commerce and in entertainment.

The price of home video recorders has dropped a good deal since the first one was sold in the '70's. Even so, it would probably need to come down some more before the recorders will become as common in the villages of poor countries as radio or even television sets. The price of a VCR in the Philippines today is about P 9800, which is only equivalent to \$ 545 because of devaluation, but this could well be a year's cash income for poor rural families. Furthermore, once past the hurdle of the cost of a television set, viewers can enjoy their programs „free“. A videocassette recorder, on the other hand, requires an initial investment in a television set in most countries, and the continuing rental cost of videotapes besides.

At the moment the videocassette recorder is very much an elitist and an essentially urban device in a country like the Philippines where radio, in spite of its relative ubiquity, is found only in less than half of all households and television in only a little more than 5 percent of them. Which is not to say that villagers will be strangers to the machine for long. There are always rural entrepreneurs who may be counted upon to hook it up to their home television sets - which are run on car batteries in places not blessed with electricity - and charge ten centavos a head (or even a peso to allow for devaluation) for the privilege of group viewing of rented videotapes in their living rooms. They have done it with television so why not with the VCR? There are even places in India, we are told, where videosassette equipment and prerecorded films are now peddled on the streets and where small moviehouses double as videohouses.

On the whole, however, in the rural hinterlands of Asia, video recorders would still be too new an innovation to have become part of the pattern of village home life.

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They may have invaded city homes and public places of rural towns, but not as yet the far-flung villages where 70 percent of the inhabitants of poor countries live. There is a story told about an overseas Filipino worker who sent home from Saudi Arabia a videocassette recorder which his family in the province could not make heads or tails of. It sat in their living room in untouched splendor until a friend who happened to come along enlightened them about its uses. The point may be overstated and it may be made less and less, but the story could well illustrate the present status of the videocassette recorder as a home medium in largely isolated rural Asia.

How will the video recorder be used in the villages when it does arrive? The poor, just like the rich, are prepared to pay a little extra for their amusement. And the odds are that the rural poor, even as the rich and the middle class now do, will mainly use the VCR for entertainment. The market for film features including R- and X-rated movies and other banned film footage, both local and foreign, is thriving in the cities and towns of developing countries. The VCR is a nice way of getting around official censorship, and forbidden tapes must surely find their way to the elite in the villages too. In this respect the VCR is more of a threat to movie-houses than to radio and television networks and much less so to publishing houses whose clientele generally belongs to a higher socioeconomic level than that of the audio-visual media.

On another plane, the replay capability of the video recorder makes it strong competition for the photo album in preserving the details of a wedding, graduation or baptism among the well-off. Doubtless it will also assume that function in the villages as well, given enough time. Videocassettes can store memories for retrospective viewing even better than photographs can. In Phillipine newspapers these days, advertisements offering video coverage of special family occasions attest to the increasing number of the newest status symbol among the elite and near elite.

In the weeks after the death of Benigno Aquino, the Filipino political figure who was gunned down at the Manila International Airport upon arrival in his home country, one of the hottest items in the video rental shops in the university town where I live was a spliced-up tape of events at the airport and at the funeral which were only very sparingly reported in the mass media at that time. And so the videocassette recorder could potentially be used to foment revolution of another kind in politically unstable countries, just as audio cassettes are said to have helping bring down a shah of Iran.

But its successes in other areas notwithstanding, the video recorder is not likely to transform education overnight or visibly hasten development in poor countries, if we are to go by the record to date of the electronic media. Radio and television have not, so why should the VCR? If anything, it may add to the worries of those who wish to guard the uniqueness of national cultures or those who wish to cultivate the habit of reflective thought associated with books.

As a duplicating and distributing technology, the VCR has to have something to copy and deliver. And this is the Achilles heel of educational video, just as it has been of educational radio and television.

The strength of the VCR in entertainment is grounded on the wide range of programming that became instantly available to fill the fresh void, and it is that programming that has quickly reached the cities of poor countries. The same swift

response is not about to come from educational video software makers, particularly in developing countries, for various reasons. One is, inevitably, lack of funding: capitalists are not falling over each other to underwrite content that people will not queue up for. Another is the relative sparsity of talent. In the agricultural extension service of the United States which is devoted to rural uplift and which has been a model for many a developing country, a study has shown that few subject matter specialists want to develop VCR materials mainly because of inexperience.

Development agencies in Asia are still betting on radio, such as it is, as the medium to reach the majority in the countryside, except possibly in India and Indonesia which are currently experimenting with satellite television. There are some pilot projects in Alaska and India which have used the participatory production of video to raise consciousness among the very poor with some success. On the other hand, the same outcome has been achieved with cheaper sound slides. By encouraging small fishermen to script and produce their own sound slides, for instance, the Asian Social Institute in the Philippines is helping build up their communication skills as well as conscientize them, help them understand what is happening in their fishing grounds.

Chances are that if the video recorder does become economically feasible as an educational tool in the villages, it will be more of a group rather than a one-to-one teacher as it usually is among more sophisticated and motivated adult learners. And like radio and television, it will likely perform best within a planned learning system in combination with other media and especially with personal interaction. Otherwise it may not rise above its built-in disadvantages of unidirectionality and impersonality that it shares with other mechanical media. When used in interaction situations, videocassettes have been found to work well in agricultural extension experiments in the United States. Even in the United States, incidentally, the VCR skill has to make its mark as a teaching device in the rural areas.

The unique capabilities of the home video recorder are most appreciated by habitual television and movie viewers. The little box has given them the freedom to select and partake from an enlarged menu of movie, TV and non-broadcast fare whenever and wherever they want. But with the present world economic climate, the power to shift time or to record a library of favorite videotypes are meaningless pleasures for most of rural Asia. They may have to wait for another sort of revolution before they can qualify as true videophiles.

In sum, then, the videocassette recorder is still a technology for the elite and the urban dweller in most of Asia and probably in other developing regions as well. It may not be for long, but the viewing patterns related to the VCR will likely be different from those in developed countries. Because of socio-economic reasons, it may be more of a group and public medium, particularly in the countryside, and not only for educational programs but also for entertainment. The latter is what it will be mainly used for in poor countries, which is how it is mainly used now in the more affluent parts of the world. It will be seen as a developmental and educational tool only as interesting and relevant software is made - which is the problem even now with radio and television. And the production of appropriate materials of course requires funding and trained people.

### *Annotation:*

- 1 Based on a paper presented at 1984 annual conference of the International Institute of Communications, West Berlin, Germany, Sept. 20-23, 1984.

## Zusammenfassung

Seit Beginn des Jahrhunderts hat es immer wieder revolutionäre Entwicklungen im Bereich der Kommunikation gegeben. Als die neueste muß wohl die „Video-Revolution“ angesehen werden. Bei allen früheren technischen Entwicklungen wurden auch Vergünstigungen für Erziehung und menschliche Entwicklung vorausgesagt. Bis jetzt aber liegen die wirklichen Gewinne im Bereich der Unterhaltung und des Kommerz. Vielleicht auch deswegen das starke Bemühen, die Kosten möglichst so niedrig zu halten, daß sie zu einem Massengebrauch führen. Das war so beim Fernsehen und ist jetzt auch beim Videorekorder der Fall. Kein Wunder deswegen, daß die Bedeutung beider wohl auch in diesen beiden Bereichen zu erwarten ist.

Die Videopreise sind seit den ersten Geräten in den siebziger Jahren stark gesunken, auch wenn sie noch billiger werden müssen, um in den Dörfern Einzug zu halten. Ein einziges Videogerät kostet auf den Philippinen durchaus das gesamte Jahreseinkommen einer armen ländlichen Familie. Hinzu kommen dann nach der Anschaffung, im Gegensatz zum Fernsehgerät, auch noch die Kosten für die Ausleihe von Videokassetten.

Im Augenblick ist der Besitz eines Videorekorders eine elitäre und städtische Erscheinung in einem Land, wo selbst das Radio trotz seiner relativen Allgegenwart nur in weniger als der Hälfte und das Fernsehen nur in etwas mehr als 5% aller Haushalte zu finden ist. Das heißt zwar nicht, daß auch Dorfbewohner diese Geräte nicht kennenlernen, weil es überall unternehmungslustige Menschen gibt, die ein solches Gerät - vielleicht mit Autobatterie gespeist - betreiben und dafür 10 Centavos oder gar einen Peso pro Person für eine Videovorführung in ihren Häusern verlangen.

Insgesamt aber wird man für das ländliche Asien sagen müssen, daß Video zu neu ist, um Teil des Dorflebens zu werden. Video gelangt vielleicht schon in ländliche Städte, aber nicht auf das Land, wo 70% der Bevölkerung leben. Wie aber wird der Videorekorder gebraucht werden, wenn er tatsächlich in den Dörfern eintrifft? Die Armen werden wie die Reichen bereit sein, etwas für ihre Unterhaltung zu zahlen. Wie die Reichen und der Mittelstand werden sie Video hauptsächlich zur Unterhaltung und Zerstreuung gebrauchen. Der Markt für Unterhaltungsfilme, einschließlich Porno und Gewalt, drängt in die Städte der Entwicklungsländer. Video ist eine gute Möglichkeit, jede Zensur zu umgehen, und so stellt es für die Filmtheater eine größere Konkurrenz dar als für Verlage. In anderer Hinsicht kann Video durch seine Wiedergabemöglichkeiten auch das Album über Familienereignisse ersetzen und auf längere Sicht auch diese Rolle in Dörfern übernehmen. Nach dem Mord an Senator Aquino in Manila wurden Videoproduktionen über den Hergang und die Beisetzung Bestseller. So könnte Video auch einer politischen Revolution dienen. Unabhängig vom Gebrauch in anderen Bereichen wird der Videorekorder nicht über Nacht die Erziehung und Entwicklung in den armen Ländern verändern. Als Wiedergabetechnik braucht Video Stoff zur Wiedergabe, und hier liegt die Achillesferse für Bildungsaufgaben, ähnlich wie bei Hör- und Sehfunk. Hier fehlt es ebenso an der Finanzierung wie an entsprechenden Talenten. Entwicklungsunternehmen in Asien vertrauen mehr dem Hörfunk als Medium für die Mehrheit auf dem Lande. Wenn die Kosten der Videogeräte zum Gebrauch für die Entwicklung wirtschaftlich vertretbar werden, dürften sie mehr als Gruppenmedien und als Teil eines organisierten Lernvorganges eingesetzt werden, wo in einer Gruppe dieser Gebrauch - ähnlich wie bei Hör- und Sehfunk - mit interpersonaler Kommunikation verbunden wird.

Videogeräte geben dem Fernsehzuschauer die Möglichkeit der Zeitverschiebung des Fernsehprogramms und zum Aufbau einer eigenen Filmothek. Aber dies ist bei der wirtschaftlichen Weltlage bedeutungslos für den größten Teil des ländlichen Asien.

Zusammenfassend kann man sagen, daß Video in den meisten Teilen Asiens und wahrscheinlich auch anderer Entwicklungskontinente eine Technik für die Elite und Stadtbewohner bleiben wird. In jedem Fall wird sich sein Gebrauch in den Entwicklungsländern von denen der entwickelten Länder vorläufig schon deswegen unterscheiden, weil wegen der wirtschaftlich-gesellschaftlichen Situation auf dem Lande Video dort ein Gruppenmedium nicht nur für die Bildung, sondern auch für Unterhaltung sein wird.

## RÉSUMÉ

Aux Philippines, la Vidéo est actuellement encore un phénomène élitaire et urbain à cause des prix des appareils qui dépassent le salaire annuel des familles rurales. Malgré cela, les habitants ruraux sont confrontés aussi avec ce moyen de communication groupal, par exemple, dans son utilisation commerciale, comme les projections publiques du cinéma. Dans les villages des Philippines, la vidéo est déjà utilisée non seulement pour le divertissement, mais aussi pour l'éducation.

## RESUMEN

En Filipinas la video es todavía un fenómeno reservado a las elites y en región urbana, principalmente en razón del precio de los aparatos que son superiores al salario anual en una familia rural. A pesar de esto, las habitantes rurales también se ven confrontados con este medio de comunicación grupal, como por ejemplo en su utilización comercial durante las proyecciones de cine público. En las aldeas Filipinas la video ya es utilizada no solamente para divertir sino que también para la educación.