

2-WAY COMMUNICATION

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Non-broadcast video has found a special place in the toolkit of British management, and in recent years its planned use has been shown to be very effective, not only in education and training, but also for 'sharing information' with the workforce. Increasing sophistication in company video communications has played an increasing role in the management achievement of a range of

objectives, such as workforce attitude-change, the implementation of redundancies, and the reduction of strike action. But the British workforce watches a lot of television, so company videos have to be very good to have the desired effect.

Last year one of the largest privately owned companies in Britain wanted to lay off 2,000 workers. It wanted to do it quietly

and with minimum reaction. A plan centring on the strategic use of video was adopted. In the beginning a video programme was made and shown to the workforce through a rapid series of screenings to small groups. This first video described 'the company problem' and was presented by an interviewer normally associated with TV programmes about

Channel Five



One of NALGO's videos

trade unions. A month later another programme was made and shown. It was about 'the company solution', and depicted some uncomfortable 'discussions' between an interviewer (who appeared to confront) and management (who appeared to sweat). The video programme went on to develop the arguments and led inexorably to the predictable, paid-for-by-management conclusion. Because the questions asked in the programme were typical of the questions that might have been asked by shop stewards (had they been given the opportunity), the effect was to occupy workforce ground and undermine the trade union position. The workforce were dismayed and defused, the redundancies initiated, and the management satisfied.

Video can be a powerful tool, and the trade union movement needs to understand how management are using it. But more especially, unions themselves can use video to aid the achievement of their own aims and objectives. Some unions have begun to explore the use of video, from training in health and safety issues through to education in current struggles such as privatisation and Tebbit-King law. NALGO recently produced a set of three programmes about privatisation in the health service as part of their 1983 campaign. One of the videos was short and punchy and was designed for public information, another which dealt with the arguments in more detail was used at union branch meetings, and the third was designed to be used by negotiators as support while presenting the arguments to employers. These tapes are now being used all over the country.

To communicate clearly and persuasively trade union videos need to be *very good*. They need to be fully researched and well put together both visually and technically.

The technical quality of a video tape determines if it can be duplicated to make copies, or whether it can be broadcast on TV. But a broadcast quality programme will probably cost a hundred times more to make than a home produced video. Production requires a constant juggling act between cost, quality and audience demands. The NALGO tapes are distributed on domestic video cassettes, and excerpts have been shown on TV. NUPE has installed over £100,000 worth of video equipment to produce real-time records of conferences. Yet their set-up cannot be used for anything else as there is no programme-making or editing capacity within the union. It takes time, training and experience to make effective use of video, and to incorporate that use into existing structures. Unions already using video have gained valuable experience which needs to be shared so that newcomers to the technology don't have to fight the same battles.

It is not always necessary for a union to make its own videos. There are many organisations and groups both willing to work with unions in the production of programmes, and committed to passing on understanding and skills. The NALGO tapes were made in a collaboration between the Birmingham Trade Union Resource Centre (TURC) and the Birmingham Film Workshop. Many similar workshops and other independent film and video workers are working throughout Britain under ACTT recognition. Their practices are characterised by new and radical uses of film and video, and by arguments calling for the democratisation of the media. An example of this work occurred in a recent strike action in Merseyside, where the pickets were being subjected to police harassment — possibly because the event

was not under media scrutiny. A video team from the local Open Eye workshop visited the scene and set up their equipment. The police retreated without a shot being taken.

There are many ways in which video can be used by the unions: magazine format news videos, mass action information videos, political education videos, trade union executive communications videos, and workplace training videos. Much useful material already exists, and is being distributed by a variety of independent distributors. It is here where the crucial problem lies. It is not enough to produce only useful programmes. They must be seen to be useful, and they must be distributed to be seen. Distribution goes beyond supplying video to union branch meetings. TURC have distributed one hundred copies of the NALGO video programme throughout the union movement in Britain, as well as supplying copies to a video distributor in Australia, and to the public sector unions in New Zealand. (In a recent letter of acknowledgement they wrote, 'we have seen the future' — privatisation is two years away in New Zealand.)

British management are spending large sums on video based communications — both in terms of production costs and the capital costs of playback equipment for screenings. At branch level shop stewards may have to counter a management video with a handful of pamphlets in the course of a worktime screening. Because works committee agreement is required before management are able to show the workforce a video, perhaps that agreement should be conditional on the unions having equal opportunities to present their views using the same equipment.

There is usually more to a successful

branch screening than just playing a video. At times it makes sense to show more than one video to highlight different aspects of an issue. Video programmes by themselves rarely provide answers, but they are good at asking questions and getting an informed discussion going. Good communications are two-way communications. A screening without feedback is like a ballot without information. Grassroots feedback from shopfloor screenings is valuable and can be fed into the union's programme production and distribution policy.

For this struggle to be effective trade unions need to make programmes which can be used at branch and shopfloor level. This year a typical union with half a million members will have a turnover of about ten

million pounds. About 10% of this will be spent on paper communications: pamphlets, newspapers, newsletters and postage. If 20% of that budget was put into video production then more than twenty programmes could be made and distributed annually. A proportion of general information videos could be made, along with other specific videos to meet the needs of special groupings within the membership.

The development of a distribution strategy is central to the use of video in trade unions. The strategy would recognise that broadcast TV provides an alternative distribution channel (if access can be obtained), and that it is useful to distribute original footage for use in other programmes to avoid needless extra production (many

unions share the same concerns). A recent initiative has been the setting up of a steering committee called TU/TV by representatives from unions using video, independent video workers, and union resource centre workers. The committee is aiming to promote the use of video in unions and is holding a day school in early summer which will be attended by officers from the major unions in Britain (enquiries to TURC).

New technology is here to be used. Video is a flexible medium that can communicate well. If trade unions are going to take education seriously then they need to take a good look at video, and consider the establishment of a video distribution network.