

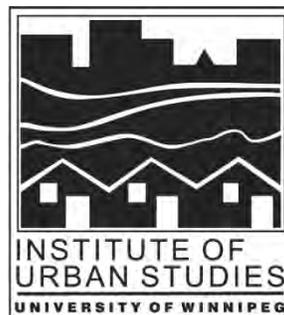
# **The Involvement of Communication Systems**

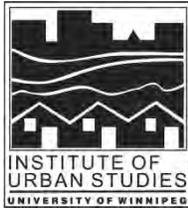
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**by Jocelyne O'Hara  
ca. 1971**

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WINNIPEG

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**THE INVOLVEMENT OF COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS**

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The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

Jocelyne O'Hara

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Introduction

In this time of serious social and physical decline in our urban centers, it has become imperative that efficient and effective use be made of communication systems. Examination and experimentation apply particularly to the question of how to use advanced technologies to improve the ability of people to know and understand themselves and the city they live in. The existing media does not offer the opportunity to community groups and individuals of being fully informed about and more involved in the issues which interest and affect them and their neighbourhoods. And, the emergence of cable television (CATV), which provide new opportunities for improved information flow and community involvement, have not been fully explored.

In recent years, several factors have led to a favorable climate for experimenting with communication tools and systems. Government has leaned heavily on formats which permit citizen participation in policy initiation and implementation. Such involvement depends upon a good two-way information flow. Citizen groups have developed new models of their own to ensure a strong voice in dealing with government policy making. Neighbourhood development corporations, community renewal corporations, citizen committees constituted to deal with specific problems are being set up in all major cities. Research by various institutes, departments and agencies provided data on how poorly citizens were informed of decisions which affected them directly and which areas of the population were most

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consistently neglected.<sup>1</sup>

Community communication changes occurred due mainly to technological factors...the emergence of videotape equipment and cable television. In no way has the potential of these two factors been met in terms of their ability to improve a community's awareness of itself, its neighbour and the social, economic and political structures which affect it directly. These two factors are isolated from other rapidly evolving communication technology because of special characteristics.

Videotape equipment has been perfected over the last decade into a portable, half-inch design capable of being operated by anyone with a minimum of training. It is marketed at a cost within reach of most institutions and groups. It has become standard equipment in many audiovisual departments in universities, colleges, high school and has been accepted as a training and therapeutic tool in hospitals, clinics, business and several social agencies. Since videotape equipment is now available in most communities, arrangements to borrow the equipment can be made.

The community television concept is presently seen as the prime means of giving citizens access to the media. CATV systems are mushrooming in communities across the continent. Community television is the public use of CATV systems.

Besides picking up, amplifying and distributing entire schedules of broadcasting stations, CATV systems also transmit directly over the cable system on one or more empty channels. This latter practice is community television.

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1. See, Government of Manitoba; "Proposals for Urban Reorganization in the Greater Winnipeg Area", December, 1970, p. 10.

See also, Neighbourhood Satisfaction Survey and Demonstration Project, Institute of Urban Studies, 1970.

In early 1970, the Institute of Urban Studies became interested in videotape recording equipment as a method of furthering community development organizing. The use of VTR equipment in community development was well illustrated in the '60's by the National Film Board on Fogo Island in Newfoundland.

Most universities were procuring videotape equipment for their audio-visual departments in the late '60's and early '70's, but its use was primarily academic...taping lectures, special university events, theatre, recording films or television programs. Subsequent to a research program where needs were identified and documented in the largest urban renewal area in Winnipeg, the Institute adopted an action-research format for its involvement in the area. A development corporation, People's Committee for a Better Neighbourhood Inc., was set up in the area with the help of IUS research and community development teams. The corporation's aim was to play an active role in the planning and supervision of urban renewal and rehabilitation in its area.

The University of Winnipeg, the NFB and other local institutions provided the citizens and Institute staff with VTR equipment to document an analysis of conditions in the area and to record any meetings held with local and provincial governments.

The use of VTR served as an extension of the community development process, helping the committee communicate with other groups of people in the area, airing a variety of ideas on redevelopment of the area and recording response. A videotape record of their bid for and success in

The two major 16 m.m. films, one on youth and the other on the aged, have been edited, sound scripted and are being distributed with the help of the National Film Board. The film on youth has won an award in Montreal.

This exercise has provided the Institute with valuable insight into the potential of film as a medium of community development and one which can be used at a reasonable cost by relatively inexperienced film makers.

During this same summer, the Institute was introduced to some residents of a middle class suburban community who had become alarmed at a number of community problems.

VTR equipment was loaned by the IUS to be used by the residents of Windsor Park as a community organizing tool. Its purposes were to gather information on the area, to help identify the needs and to stimulate participation in a social action process within the wider community context. IUS consultants suggested that the citizens invite people who were taped to view the film and thereby involve a greater number of people. Other than being extremely useful in collecting information, this capacity for showing a film almost immediately to those filmed is a primary reason that VTR is also a community organizing tool. It can enlist people by offering a two-directional flow of information which provides greater community cohesion and organization. On several occasions persons filmed were invited to view the tapes made, but, due to technical problems inherent in the equipment at the time, these meetings were not as successful as anticipated.

But, the tapes were instrumental in identifying and resolving some of the recreational problems. Due in large part to the discussions resulting from the viewing of tapes on swimming pool and local park conditions, effective changes were made the following summer to the satisfaction of the community at large.

The bilingual issues in the education system in St. Boniface, where Windsor Park is located, had been creating conflict among several groups. This was due chiefly to an inadequate exchange of information related to the implementation of provincial Bill 113 on French language instruction. The group in Windsor Park arranged to videotape a series of school board public seminars on the question, using both French and English film crews and ending up with one French and one English tape. Requests to view these tapes were overwhelming and indicated the community's response to the implementation of Bill 113.

As a result of the above experience and information gathered, the IUS approached the Winnipeg Foundation to obtain financial backing for a project intended to improve community communication through the medium of community television. The objectives of the project were to instruct community people in the use of VTR equipment and in the preparation of programs, to investigate the technical, financial and organizational requirements of a community television system, to explore the possibility of forming a community communication corporation or a charter board and to conduct a seminar and a series of workshops on community television.

During the initial six month stage of the project, IUS research staff compiled available information on the legal and financial implications of community television via cable. First hand information was obtained

from several cities in the country where experiments in community television were being attempted. On the technical side, further experimentation with various types of videotape recorders was made. Institutions, agencies and government were approached to assess the technical resources of the city. The information gathered was put in several forms, such as newspapers, reports, and tapes. Simultaneously, IUS staff met on several occasions with the cable companies outlining proposals, sharing information and discussing methods of using the channel designated by the Canadian Radio and Television Commission for community television. Position papers on cable television potential were prepared by the Institute for the provincial government at their request and a brief was sent to the CRTC for their hearings on the future of CATV in Canada.

A major conference on community television, held at the University of Winnipeg in May 1971, brought together, as hoped, a cross-section of the community and service groups, federal, provincial and municipal institutions, labour and business.

The main goal of the conference was to bring people to a level of awareness of community communication systems so that they might:

- (a) understand the dynamics of communication;
- (b) understanding the implications of community television;
- (c) understand the legal, financial and program problems involved with cable;
- (d) become interested and participate in future smaller work groups dealing with community cable communications;

(e) begin thinking about an alternative to establishing a community communications corporation to make community television a self-sufficient, citizen run project.

The conference went a long way towards achieving the goals of the communications project as a whole. It brought together the representatives of many groups, kept them together for two days, submitted them to an almost overwhelming amount of information and then gave them direction, impetus and a chance to discuss among themselves the entire concept. The Institute of Urban Studies tied together the various goals on the second day, which was, in fact, the crux of the whole conference.

In the end, the delegates decided to set up an ad hoc committee which would answer specific questions posed by the conference, look into all facets of community TV and report back to another conference composed of those present plus others in the community who would be encouraged to come. Twenty-seven people volunteered to sit on the committee. Thus, it became evident that, provided certain controllable preconditions were present, groups wishing to get involved in the concept of community TV need not take several years to reach the level of awareness necessary to take action.

The conference was a success in that many people became interested in and began talking about community TV. And even more important, perhaps, is that the media operators became more responsive to the users and began seeking out the users of these systems rather than remaining passive.

The ad hoc committee met at a minimum of once every two weeks from May to October. They were handed the broadest of mandates by the conference delegates, one of unlimited scope in investigating the fiscal, legal and social aspects of community television and its implications for Winnipeg.

While undertaking routine development work with people involved with or interested in community television, the cable companies with whom they met and exchanged ideas and members of the provincial and federal governments, the ad hoc committee gained further information on how community television could become a reality in Winnipeg. The membership of the committee was expanded during the course of its tenure and literature on community television and the workings of the ad hoc committee was distributed to an ever increasing number of people.

In some respects it can be said that the Ad Hoc Committee provided the bridge between the Institute of Urban Studies, under whose auspices it was created, and a more formal community.

This group of citizens from the community worked alongside the Institute in presenting information to the Winnipeg community and in securing a grant for an experimental project in community communication.

In mid-October, the Ad Hoc Committee prepared a second community television conference at which time a community communications council was formed and 11 persons were elected to its board.

While the Ad Hoc Committee was seeking answers to some of the questions on community television being raised across the country, the Institute continued experimenting with varied forms of equipment and usage. A series of tapes were made on zoning by-laws, urban planning renewal schemes, housing revitalization and recreation and groups were invited to borrow them.

Aided by a grant from the Opportunities for Youth Program, 12 students worked with videotape equipment under the supervision of IUS staff. They helped people from various parts of the city tape and edit some concern or interest they felt should be exposed. Besides the community work involved in producing such tapes, the students also undertook experiments in video theatre.

The workshops operated during the summer, training some 300 community people in the use and theory of videotape equipment.

From the outset of the Institute's interest in communication and especially in community television, talks were held with local cable operators. Technicians from the cable companies, the Institute and the National Film Board made tests on the reliability of half-inch and one-inch VTR on cable. And, through the efforts of the cable companies, Red River Community College and the Institute, segments of a summer street festival, Get Together '71, were videotaped and shown on the community cable channel.

During the summer, the Institute had also been involved in examining the new legislation which would amalgamate seven adjacent cities to the city of Winnipeg. It became evident through surveys, discussion and observation, that the unicity concept and its implications were not understood by many people.

At the end of the summer, the Institute had VTR equipment, 300 community people trained in its use, information on and an increased understanding of the unicity concept, a realization that the mass media was not capable of providing exposure to all candidates in the unicity

elections and, above all, a desire to experiment with community television to demonstrate to the citizens of Winnipeg that the concept was socially valid.

Following meetings with provincial government officials and their acceptance of a proposal for such an experiment, the Ad Hoc Committee and IUS received a grant of \$22,300 to undertake coverage of unicity elections.

To quote an article on community television and the unicity project by Heather Robertson in the January 1971 issue of MacLean's magazine:

"The most ambitious experiment (in Canada) has taken place in Winnipeg ... The program ran three hours a night on cable Channel 9 from September 15 to October 15 ... The program was, to say the least, extraordinary. All 150-odd candidates appeared, two and three at a time, sitting in a row in a dim studio, confronting an interviewer too amazed to ask questions. Some mumbled statements from bits of paper, showing us their bald spots; others lapsed into incoherence or total silence. One person read a statement in Italian for 25 minutes; someone else did the same in Ukranian. Man-in-the street interviews were Groucho Marx things full of tilters, nonsense and shouted directions from the producer. If you could stand the boredom it was vintage 1954 CBC. The people who produced it are apologetic about it, promising to do better next time. This would be a mistake. In one evening of watching, I learned more about local politicians than I had in a lifetime of watching CBC."

The unicity project helped identify some community and local issues which are too often passed over for major election campaign issues. Simultaneously, the unicity experiment enabled a large number of people to become informed and aware of issues at the neighbourhood level. It became evident that various levels of government could make use of such a

communication system to communicate with citizens. On the other hand, citizens could react to issues that concerned them and indicate their concerns to candidates and government officials.

The project showed that people other than professionals could inexpensively produce programs for cable television, that production and planning could be handled by volunteers, that the concept of a community television system using portable videotape equipment can become a useful and exciting form of community involvement.

Many questions, however, remain unanswered: the issue of cable television control and access; the question of availability and coordination of necessary equipment; the question of how to change television viewing habits in program target areas; and, above all, the question of financial resources. They all point to a further need to investigate and develop the community communication system concept and its implementation.

With the unicity project having generated an impetus for citizens to utilize communication networks, Winnipeg Community Communication Incorporated provided continuing information through a number of publications and training workshops on the use of communication media and videotape. It has made its skills and expertise available to such groups as Cultural Horizons, a group of artists and craftsmen touring Manitoba schools, the Health Action Committee and a number of Winnipeg's community committees. It is currently working on a series of 26 AM radio programs to be broadcast in the next year. Its membership is increasing every month and it promises to perform a valuable role in preparing the public to use the communication media, which has been monopolized for too long.