

Empowerment Through Digital Video Technology
A case study on *Videopower*

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This is an exploratory study on how digital video technology is used for community empowerment and its effectiveness in doing so. An ethnographical approach was used to study the case of *Videopower*, a video activist group and a fringe medium. Digital video technology enabled *Videopower's* current social and communal use of video, and a wide variety of application was observed. Initial evidence of empowerment was found when the target community was involved in video making, but there was no indication of empowerment when the target community was not participated in the production process. *Videopower* look for a very active audience, which ideally should participate in the actions they cover. They are, however, often ambiguous in whom to include or exclude in their events.

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Introduction

CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHOD

I began to conceptualize this study a few months before I conducted it. Until then, I had an education heavily emphasized on Quantitative Communication Research. I, therefore, first thought of using a content analysis method for this study. Nevertheless, enlightened by Dr. Louis Leung, my advisor, and Dr. Eric Kit Wai Ma, who taught me qualitative research methods, I finally carried out this study in a more appropriate way – ethnography.

I am a learner in ethnography throughout the research process. My knowledge in ethnographical research method increases towards the end of the study through class attendance and field experience. Not knowing what changes I, as the researcher, would have brought to the field in the research process, I adopted a complete observer role in my first observation and increased my participation (and interaction with subjects) in subsequent field works.

As there is a lack of previous research on this topic in Hong Kong, this study is exploratory in nature. In an exploratory study measuring mediation empowerment, Edward Schwerin quoted Selltiz, “In the case of problems about which little knowledge is available, an exploratory study is usually most appropriate” (Schwerin, 1995, p.93). Similar to Schwerin’s research, this study is descriptive rather than formal hypothesis

testing. Different from Schwerin's, however, this study uses an ethnographical approach rather than a quasi-experiment method. I found ethnography more appropriate than quasi-experiment in this study because *Videopower's* projects are, in nature, often local and community specific instead of inducing general and regional political changes. In that case, a quantitative evaluation of empowerment across different projects would require a much more complex measurement, which is beyond the scope of this exploratory study.

RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

I had an experience in shooting social movements. In order to get footages for a personal production later exhibited in Hong Kong Film Archive, I shot two demonstrations On 30th September and 1st October 2001. The first one was a peace advocating demonstration against the US bombing of Afghanistan after the "911" tragedy. The second one was Leung Kwok-Hung's (April Fifth Action) national day demonstration against the Beijing government. It was my first time looking at a demonstration seriously, in person and at its frontier (the line between police and demonstrators). From that experience, I was surprised by how unrealistic demonstrations are shown on TV—always showing the confrontation "climax" only, instead of the more rational progression of the event. The realization that we are just seeing routine stories, particularly framed shots and sequences everyday fits well with many of the liberal critiques on mainstream media I exposed to as a communication studies student, including Noam Chomsky's "Manufacturing Consent". As a result, I continued to have high expectations on fringe media, those less controlled by economic and political

powers. On the other hand, I always doubt the power of fringe media to bring about social change because they have a small audience and often limited distribution channel. Besides my education in communication studies, my view on video is also affected by May Fung, an experienced video artist in Hong Kong. I accepted that video should be used to reflect original human feelings and thoughts in an honest and truthful way. I have also been exposed to many experimental videos and used to seeing more abstract works. In terms of video production capability, I am competent in independent or small-scale video productions using DV technology and non-linear editing. I also have experience in designing and teaching workshops in school settings.

I first heard about *Videopower* from a documentary program produced by RTHK a few years ago. I didn't pay much attention to the program and just learned that they shoot videos in order to help people to fight for their rights. Later on, I heard about it again from a friend who studies cultural studies in Ling Nan University. He told me that *Videopower* held some workshops in the Sham Shui Po neighborhood. Since then, I had an impression that teaching community members to make video could be a kind of empowerment to them. This view was further supported by information I heard from May Fung. She described a recent *videopower* production enabled by DV technology -- a disabled person, who relies on wheelchair to get around, took a DV camera with him and recorded his daily experience moving around in Hong Kong from his very own perspective. From Fung, I also learnt that *Videopower* has been steadily subsidized by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Her description of video power as group of

people with strong “ideological insistence” also resonates with another comment I heard from an experienced broadcast journalist, “Videopower is actually a social movement”.

Later, I attended a talk on “Hong Kong video art history” given by May Fung in Ling Nan University and saw “Dai Wo Lam Tau” (大禍臨頭), a representative and most publicly screened documentary produced by *Videopower* in 1995. The video uses a very proactive and advocating tone to support the affected residents in Kam Lun Building (金輪大廈) redevelopment project to fight for their rights. For example, when shooting a demonstration of the affected residents, they shot from the demonstrators’ point of view and questioned the police like “why do you arrest him”, “Why do you hit him”, etc. They also use spiritual background music to enhance the supportive mood of the video. From the *videopower* website (<http://www.videopower.org.hk>), I also saw some more recent productions about the demolition of Tai Hom Village. They are quite consistent with “Dai Wo Lam Tau” in their stance, tone and perspective.

At the beginning of the study, I also tried to find *Videopower*’s own official description. However, clicking on the “who we are” (我們是誰) button on their web site returned nothing but “Not Found. The requested URL was not found on this server”. It was not until the latter days of this study did I read about how Cheng Chi-Hung (The leader of *Videopower*) describes *Videopower* in an interview by *Streetcorners*, a periodical subtitled “Hong Kong Social Movement Notes”. *Streetcorner* is a Chinese publication, and here I translate the description of *Videopower*, as said by Cheng, as follows,

“*Videopower* has four major aims. First, promote video media’s participation in social movements. Second, promote video as the speaking channel of disadvantaged groups among people. Third, provide the public with resources so that they can use video to express their views. Fourth, organize various video workshops, productions, screenings and discussions. The funding mainly comes from Art Development Council (ADC).”

EMPOWERMENT

“Empower is a very fashionable word to use,” I still remember this comment clearly two years after I heard it from an advisor at the writing centre of the University of Michigan. According to Schwerin, “Empowerment” is “commonly used in the popular media, and most Americans have at least some idea of what they think it means”(Schwerin, 1995, p.56). From my experience, I found this term equally welcomed in Hong Kong.

In a class assignment, when I first suggested my groupmate to work on a presentation with me about how technology can help the disadvantaged groups to speak out, she seemed uninterested. However, after I said it is something about “empower”, she responded positively and said “now, I think it is interesting because you mentioned ‘empower’”. Similarly, during my first phone conversation with Cheng Chi-Hung, he expressed “having no interest in research” but still, picked up the keyword “empowerment” and continued to talk about it.

With reference to John Friedmann, Lui Tai-Lok has made the concept “empowerment”, together with a Chinese translation, *Chung Kuen* (充權, literally meaning “filling with power”), prominent to the Hong Kong academia as well as the cultural field through his 1995 study on low-income households in Hong Kong (Lui, 1995, p.3). Recently, quoting Yip Kin Yuen, an education policy and administration scholar, elite newspaper Ming Pao used the empowerment concept, with another translation-- *Tsang Kuen* (增權, literally meaning “increasing power”) in describing a Chai Wan Primary school’s children counseling scheme.

It is possible that the lure of “empowerment” comes exactly from its ambiguity. “The value of empowerment appears to be so widely accepted that it is embraced by people with quite different values and ideologies, by theorists of the political right, as well as the political left.” (Schwerin, 1995, p.56) Though this term is elusive and perhaps inappropriate to tie it to a single, coherent definition due to its multidisciplinary nature, effort of clarification has been made. Generalizing from “major theorists, action researchers and reflective practitioners from the social science, education and public health”, Schwerin refined eight components of “empowerment” (Schwerin, 1995, p.62), namely, self-esteem, self-efficacy, knowledge and skills, political awareness, social participation, political participation, political rights and responsibilities and resources. The first two components are mentioned in most of the definitions Schwerin surveyed, so that they are considered the most important ones.

Self-esteem is close in meaning to Self-worth, self-acceptance and self-respect (Schwerin, 1995, P.61). Self-esteem is “the evaluative function of the self-concept. High self-esteem indicates a positive attitude toward oneself and one’s behavior” (Schwerin, 1995). In defining self-efficacy, Albert Bandura is perhaps the most quoted theorist. According to his definition, self-efficacy can be understood as people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to deal with situations deriving from various circumstances (Schwerin, 1995, Lin 2000).

2

Challenge Getting Through Messages to the Audience

“Why are they trying to fix the cloth all night?”

SWEET LIFE CULTURAL FESTIVAL (26TH JAN, 2002)

As stated earlier in the introduction, I adopted a complete observer role in this first observation. However, being an audience in a public performance may actually be “participating” in a way. I sat in the front row among the audience and took detailed notes about the event.

I learned about this event from the “recent action/news” section of *Videopower’s* website. I also saw a poster on the glass doors of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) student council and from that I knew Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) was involved in the event. From the mainstream media, I got the impression that HKFS organizers are often involved in radical social movements.

The official title of the event was “Tim Mei Sang Wood Man Fa Jit” (甜美生活文化節), which I translated as “Sweet Life Cultural Festival”. As stated on the handout of the festival, it was jointly organized by “Mutual Support Society for the Benefits of the Grassroots” (translated from “基層權益互助社”), “HKFS social movement resource center” (translated from “學聯社運資源中心”), and *Videopower*. The venue was “Yung She Tao” Park in Yau Ma Tei. I used to pass through this park when I go to see movies at

the “Cinematheque” cinema. I saw some individual performances in the park before, but had never stopped seriously for an event.

The audience comprised mainly of local middle-aged men and elderly men who seem to hang around in the park regularly. The metallic fence of a construction site (a temple nearby was under renovation) was used as the background of the performances, decorated with graffiti. A plain white cloth was erected in front of the background as a video projection screen. There was a roof covering the stage, constructed from bamboo poles, plastic “cloths” and black plastic rubbish bags. In short, the stage construction blended well into the environment of the park. Under the roof, however, there were plenty of professional electronics equipments, such as amplifiers, video projectors, mixers, drum sets, etc.

The night’s performances included youth underground band music, elderly people’s folk tunes (played or sung by elderly performers, some tunes were even written by the performer themselves), drama by university students, and videos (produced by *Videopower*). *Videopower* members also covered the entire event with multiple DV cameras. The cameras used by *videopower* were more sophisticated than average consumer grade cameras. For example, I spotted some Sony TRV 900 DV camcorders and a couple DCR VX-2000s. At least 3 camera were used at a time when covering the show. An amateur micro wireless camera, about the size of a tennis ball, was used to get extreme close-ups and shots from an exotic angle. The video signal of this camera was projected live on the white cloth screen. The signal transmitted/received was not perfect and was interrupted occasionally. The operator of this wireless camera was very excited doing his job and often moved in and out among the performers.

One senior citizen called “uncle chung” (忠伯), identified himself as a “Gai Fong” (街坊, meaning a member from a particular neighborhood) from Shum Shui Po, seemed to know the MC well. The song he sang was “Giving is the Happiest Thing” (為善最樂), which was a song based on the melody of “Man Should Strengthen Themselves” (男兒當自強), with the lyrics rewritten. The MC s clapped in sync with the beat of the song. When Chung finished, the audience cheered and called “Encore”. Then he went on and sang another two songs. He later introduced himself more formally as “Chung Wai-Man, From Sham Shui Po Salvation Army elderly center.” A member from the audience seemed exceptionally interested in Uncle Chung’s performance and, encouraged by one of the MC s, “jammed in” and sang.

Video screening came in the middle of the night, and altogether two videos were shown. The first one was a documentary showing how grassroot workers (such as sanitation workers) working throughout the new year and Christmas holidays to provide us service. One of the MC s of the event explained the video, pointing the audience to the unfair working conditions those workers are facing and implied that we should pay more respect to them. After that, a new screen was set up right in front of the audience. The screen was made of a thin, translucent paper, and was held up by two people grasping its two sides. Because of its lightness, it was blown slightly in and out by the wind like a breeze blowing a flag. Video was projected from the back of the screen (more like a TV projection than a cinema projection). This second video was believed to be the theme video of the night. Unlike the first video, which was a kind of documentary, this video was a conceptual one. It was a montage sequence of TV advertisements, showing

materialistic ways of living and the lure of consumer goods, including middle class homes, ice-cream (Hagan Das) and G.O.D. (a yuppie furniture store), banks, financial institutions, etc. Towards the latter part of the video, shots of a toilet bowl, somewhat disgusting, with some toilet paper, dirt and a cigarette was inserted into the “sweet” materialistic images sequences as interruption or comparison. The video itself is silent but at the background, the band and a female singer improvised and sang painfully and emotionally, sometimes shouting. Besides improvised singing, there were a few recognizable words like “love” and “freedom” in the “song”.

Although some members of the audience left the show, probably because of escaping the rain (it started raining) or felt that they were distanced from such presentation, there still was a crowd staying for the multimedia performance. A middle-aged man, however, did not understand the purpose of the video and commented in a confusing and a little annoying tone “Why are they trying to fix the cloth all night? “(成晚都係度整塊布!) several times. Even so, he stayed patiently for the performance. At the climax of the video, the screen was ruptured by the female improvisational singer. The audience clapped and cheered upon the action because of the exciting effect it generated.

In this cultural festival, it was hard to find any indication of empowerment through the use of video. The audience seemed less interested and less identified with the video presentations than other performances. We do not know whether the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the audience was boosted by the videos. Some of the audience members had trouble understanding the second, conceptual video performance. I told Eric Ma, my ethnography teacher what I saw in the field and he commented that the

middle-aged men might even be “intimidated”, his self confidence might even be lowered since he felt that he could not understand the messages targeted him. The communication incompatibility may have further marginalized him, as he might think that he is worse than his peers, who are already in a marginalized community (middle-aged who received limited education). On the other hand, for such an audience, more familiar forms of presentations (such as Uncle Chung’s singing), maybe better empowering. Since Uncle Chung was much encouraged and recognized by the MC s and the audience, his experience may qualify as empowerment in many ways (raised self-esteem, self-efficacy and social participation).

In a phone conversation with Cheng Chi-Hung in April, Cheng commented, “the projection results of the videos was unsatisfactory”. He, however, still valued the cultural festival highly, on the grounds of it “greatly enhanced the communication and understanding among *Videopower* working team members”. Therefore, one could infer that if the target audience were participated in the video production, they could get similar benefits which the *Videopower* working team got from working towards the cultural festival (as well as what Uncle Chung got from his singing). Indeed, such an inference found support in a latter observation in this study—The Johnston Road project.

3

Documenting Lives— For Public or Private?

Rainbow Marriage Action (5th April, 2002)

From the Videopower website, this event was known as “Water blowing fun workshop” (吹水同樂坊, in Cantonese, “Water blowing” means casual chat). I heard about the “Rainbow Marriage Action” from the news earlier. However, I did not remember the details of it nor the names of the brides and grooms at the time I was going to attend this “fun workshop”. From the description on the website, “exclusive video footage” about the weddings (homosexual) would be shown during the workshop. It was, however, unclear that how important video screening was in the event.

The event was scheduled to begin at 7p.m, venue: Hong Kong Federation of Students office. Since I was not familiar with the place, I got there an hour early and it was still closed by the time I got there. I hanged around outside the flat for a short while until a staff member arrived and opened the door. I was rather tired that day as I watched two movies at the HK international film festival, and I started to doubt if there would really be some video showing. If not, I would leave. Therefore, I tried to confirm from the staff member I saw whether videos would be shown. He, however, was unsure and asked me to phone Tony, the organizer of the event. Tony said that there should be some video showing. I told him that I am a student from CUHK and needed to “do a homework about social movement video”. He suggested me to confirm with another person call “Tommy Chai”(Tommy 仔).

“Tommy Chai’s” number was connected to a pager, so I had to left a message telling him what I call him for. The message I left was “Student from Chinese U want to ask about video” (中大學生想問關於 Video 〇 既野)。I thought “Tommy Chai” as another organizer of the event and remembered him as a member of “Rainbow of Hong Kong” (他她中學). I, however, did not know that he was one of the “just married” in the action (there were two couples in the marriage), and mistakenly thought that he was the secondary school student who made himself known in the mass media though advocating homosexual rights. I, therefore, thought that I would be welcomed as a researcher from the academia.

After about 10 minutes, I got called back. At that time I was in a very noisy and busy street, and had a hard time hearing what he said on the phone. I went on and told him that I am a researcher working on my New Media master’s degree, researching on “something about video”, and asked him if some video would be shown at that night. His response was not receptive and denied that there would be a video screening event. He said that the video is “not yet edited” and might “show a bit”. I further told him that I was researching the relationship between video and empowerment and asked if *Videopower* was involved or not. He asked me back if I knew what they are doing. “What will you do tonight? So you are going to interview us?” he questioned with much reservation. I told him that I would just “make observation” and “take notes”. “Then we do not welcome you”, he said. I tried to negotiate and said I would watch whatever video is shown. Then he again emphasized that it was not a video screening event and it was just for “a group of people to play together”. He then went on and made it vague on whether video would be shown, and finally said, “you should turn back to videopower”.

Upon his refusal, my first reaction was being more curious about the event. I thought of waiting them at HKFS and renegotiate access, like assuring them that I would blend into their event and “not doing homework”. However, on a second thought, I realized that it was not a truly public event. The place at HKFS itself was rather private (an activity room with sofas). I realized that my presence would definitely be noticed, and perhaps too intrusive. They may be affected by me in their video viewing behavior. Consider that I wanted to continue my research on how this group of people uses video in future, I decided to give up going to the event.

Again, I am unable to conclude whether any empowerment was done through video in this observation. It is, however, hard to argue that his unwillingness in showing video to a researcher is any sign of improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and social participation, etc. On the other hand, this experience made me aware that *Videopower* is sometimes unsure about how the material they shot would be used. They may not have a clear common understanding, on the purpose and usage of the video, between them and the groups (and some disadvantaged groups) they work with. When I spoke with Cheng Chi-Hung on the phone in April about the “Rainbow Marriage Movement”, he said that they covered the event because one of the brides is a friend of their member (the member is also an alumni of CUHK, he told me).

Exclusive while being Inclusive— Who are they looking for?

PHONE CONVERSATION WITH MR. CHENG CHI-HUNG (12TH APRIL, 2002)

Since the research period approaching an end, I planned to do an “exit interview” with Cheng Chi-Hung. I knew May Fung has his contact, so I asked her about it.

I phoned Cheng Chi-Hung and called him formally as “Mr. Cheng Chi-Hung”. Later I found out that he has a friendlier nickname call “Big Hung”. I told him that I got his contact from May Fung and he was slightly suspicious. I fully disclosed myself as “a student in the New Media program in CUHK”, was exposed to more liberal perspectives of the mass media such as Noam Chomsky’s and therefore interested in social movement videos. I also presented myself as a learner in communication studies. The atmosphere of this conversation was very good. Although he said that he “has no interest in research”, (which he later revised as “do not know how to help people doing research”) he told me a lot of thing willingly. For several times he told me to read *Streetcorner* magazine in order to know more about their organization and what their “recent actions” were.

In order to “generate rapport” (as I learned from my ethnography class), I actively talked about a number of their past events, including “Sweet Life Cultural Festival”, which turned out to be very important in further establishing our relationship. From the conversation, I felt that the event was an important event for them, and perhaps

the most open to public event I quoted in this study-- certain events are open but others are not.

He was very willing to talk about the website as well. He was much delighted to know that I paid attention to their website constantly. He mentioned that once upon a time they had built a mail list and send newsletters to interested parties. However, now they have cancelled the newsletter because they found that sometimes unexpected people came. He gave me an example that once a person in his twenties came to a workshop for the teenage deaf (at Kai Shing School), and “they have no idea how to serve him”. He, however, was far from denying the value of website. He was very positive about using World Wide Web and currently seeking a way to utilize this medium.

During the conversation, I had a feeling that Video Power was a rather large organization (and it turned out to be false), because he said he went overseas and left behind some projects for others to take care. Sometimes, other members know better what is going on than him. I later learned that he actually works for RTHK and has to work in overseas productions very often.

As far as workshops, he told me that they are done with all workshops in the current year, and he was writing proposal for the ADC for another year’s funding. He said that later on, they would cooperate with Wong Wai-King for a Tai O project. Wong Wai-King, I heard from other media that she is someone who grown up in Tai O, and is the one who wants to establish a museum about Tai O. They will go there and shoot during May and July. One of the productions will be about the four seasons of Tai O.

He told me that two days later, they would meet with the Johnston Road neighborhood for a video project. When I asked if I could go, he denied on the grounds of “the neighbors maybe uncomfortable to see so many newcomers”, and the venue was just a private place they borrow from a social worker.

When I suggested an interview, he also responded receptively. He again recommend me to read *Streetcorner* first. He told me that he has a regular job, but as soon as he is in HK, he would be free and willing to talk with me. It turned out that *Streetcorner* had an interview on him, and the information from the interview was indeed enough for this study.

STREET CORNER, LOST AND FOUND (13TH APRIL, 2002)

On my field notes, I described this day as a very exciting day, as it was the turning point of a couple events. First, as instructed by Cheng Chi-Hung, I went to the Mong Kok “mezzanine floor” bookstores and searched for the book *Streetcorner*. However, “Tin Yuen” and “Lok Man” did not know about the book at all. At first, I searched the magazine rack and the local sociology rack, but could not find it. Until I went to Hung Yip (洪業) bookstore, I found a shopkeeper who knew about it. He described it as a “square sized book with a lot of pictures and text”, but was out of stock. (Later I found out that “Hung Yip Book Store” is indeed printed on *Streetcorners* as distributor). Not being able to find from the above stores, I turned to an unlikely target-- “Chung Nam” (中南圖書公司). On the way walking south to Chung Nam, at the street corner of Shantung Street, which was then a “part-time pedestrian area”, I heard some amplified dialog, and saw some street dramas. I quickly recognized many of them as

performers in “Sweet Life Cultural Festival”, so I stayed and watched many of the short dramas (each performed by 2 people, about 1-2 minutes long). I knew some of them must be from *Videopower*. Then I saw one woman shooting the dramas, using a Sony TRV 900 video camera, with “videopower” written on it. One of the dramas referred to the TV news’ inadequacy to show the whole true of the “right of abode” issue. I saw a young woman in her twenties (I later learned that she is Lee Wai-Yee) holding a sketchbook, a felt pen and a clipboard. I knew that she would want to do some kind of survey. Because I stayed for a long time and I showed interest in the event, she came to me in a friendly manner and asked me to “write some opinion after seeing the show, it doesn’t matter if you do not support their movement”.

I continue to watch their show, and expectedly, she came to me again and asked me to write down my opinion towards the end of the show. I initiated the conversation by asking, “Are you all in an organization specifically formed to ‘fight for right of abode’?” (Helping mainland residents who claimed to have the right of abode in Hong Kong to say in Hong Kong). She told me that they were “just a group of friends” who “have same places to ‘po’ (hang around)”. I continued to talk about “Sweet Life”, my hobby in video making, and asked her about *Videopower*. She was a little surprised that I knew *videopower*, and told me that she belongs to *Videopower*. She asked me if I were a student and, in a very natural way, I became know to her as “A student from the School of Journalism and Communication, CUHK”, and she told me that her name is “Wai-Yee” (維怡).

I indeed, did find her very familiar since the very beginning. After she told me her name, I confirmed that she was “Lee Wai-Yee”, whom I read about on Ming Pao. I

remembered her rather clearly because she wrote about grassroots in Yau Ma Tei and won the “United Novel Prize” (聯合文學小說獎). Then, some of her acquaintances passed by and said “Hi”. She told me that those were her former students. As I remembered from the news article that she was once a teach assistant in Ling Nan, I asked for confirmation. She was surprised and delighted that I knew her. After some more talking, she invited me to the Sunday meeting of the Johnston Road video project.

After I left the field, I struggled whether I should go to the Johnston Road meeting because Cheng Chi-Hung once denied me. However, I eventually concluded that I should go because to Wai-Yee, I was perhaps no difference from any other CUHK student. As she invited me, she should have a way to put me in. It turned out that this judgment was correct, and the Johnston Road meeting was an important observation. From this experience, I concluded that they bring people into their projects in a rather personal manner, using a non-probability sampling. Besides, to find out about their actions and information is somewhat by chance.

5

Empowerment Through the Production Process

The means justifies the ends

JOHNSTON ROAD NEIGHBOURHOOD (14TH APRIL, 2002)

It turned out that Wai-Yee is a very active member of *Videopower* these days. She brought a number of her former students and me to a screening and sharing section of her Johnston Road video project. The project aimed at teaching the affected residents in the government's Johnston Road redevelopment project skills of video making, so that they can document their own living condition, life history and problems they face due to redevelopment. Because she knew that I was a student, she told me with great enthusiasm about their future plans on the way to the venue. I was told that they would hold a series of projects about urban re-development in two years and organize another cultural festival on this topic. She was surprised by how the Wan-Chai neighborhood was receptive to video making activities—that they got together “not because of money, compensation, but making video”. She also told me that some participants has already gone to other districts and organized workshops for other people. At that time, I thought that this was the first trace of empowerment.

The meeting place was on the top floor of a “pre-war” (used by Wai-Yee, a usual way to describe buildings constructed before WWII in Hong Kong) four stories apartment building. The building facilities (such as the staircase and the doors) were

antique. Wai-Yee gave all the “guests” a tour of the flat and explained the dilapidated condition of the flat, such as there were no toilet facilities in the flat. A TV Set was put into the middle of the living room of flat (about 300 square feet), which was used to show the productions of their video project later. Black and white photographs about the Wan Chai re-development issue taken by Wai-Yee and her associates were exhibited on the walls. The pictures carefully reflected the architecture, culture and geography of the Wan Chai area and I found them very educational. The premise included a flat roof, which can see many new high-rise buildings around from a low angle (and this is what the area is going to be like after the re-development project?) There was a small room on the rooftop, which, according to Wai-Yee, may be turned into an editing suite in future.

Besides screening, *Videopower* members also scheduled to have a serious meeting with the project participants (from the Wan Chai Neighborhood). The meeting was held on third floor and continued for about an hour after we arrived. We were settled on the fourth floor and were kept away from the meeting. During our wait (for the sharing section with the neighbors), we were shown some works they produced since a few months ago.

Altogether five videos were shown before we met the neighbors. All of them were shot on DV and edited on desktop computers. Techniques such as animated titles, dubbing and background music were used. The content and form of the videos are briefly described as follows,

Hei Lo Oi Lok (起路衰落)- a video already been shown at Art centre in February, 2002. Begin as a short drama with a few dialogues between the neighbors talking about what they are worrying about redevelopment (and why they are so anxious about it). Then, it continued as a documentary with interviews of the neighbors and also extensive shots of every street around the Johnston Road area.

My Home is in Wan Chai (我的家在灣仔)- an August 2001 production. It focused on one neighbor who lives in Wan Chai since the his home was a new building, then the building gets old and finally the building will be torn down.

The Home of Shan Shan (珊珊間屋)- a documentary showing her own flat and flats of her neighbors. In the interviews with her neighbors, she often asked leading questions. The main theme of the video was that they suffer from the ambiguous timetable and policy of redevelopment of the government.

Ser Chiu and neighbors (佢樵和他們的鄰居)- documented some details on how the redevelopment policy affects their daily life.

A 35 hour fight (抗爭 35 小時)- a documentary of their demonstration against the government on the redevelopment policy outside the Government headquarters and the Legislative Council building, in which representatives from the neighborhood handed letters to CH Tung, Anthony Leung, Lee Wah Ming, Tsang Yuk Shing. They also had dialog with Lee Wah Ming (member of the Legislative Council) in the demonstration. Later on, they went to the Housing Authority Headquarters and had another demonstration. Then, a representative of the neighbors had a meeting of an officer. Lengthy takes of a medium shot of the officer speaking, sitting at a meeting table

occupied the second part of the video. Because it was so lengthy, the video was stopped, as the neighbors were ready to come upstairs to have the sharing section.

Among the neighbors, three of them were actively participants in the video project, namely Shan Shan, Henry and John. The students were rather inactive in the sharing and had little mixing with the neighbors. Big Hung (Cheng Chi-Hung's nickname) tried to know more about the students and introduced everyone. Then, initiated by Shan Shan, her new production was shown. The video was edited by Wai-Yee, with animated titles and music. In the video, we saw Shan Shan and May Yip (another active participant, not present in the sharing) running around many homes and interviewed their neighbors. I later learned in the sharing that they contacted their neighbors and found interested parties through the social workers who worked with them. Again, a proactive perspective and interviews full of leading questions were seen. Shan Shan seemed very knowledgeable about all the laws and policies concerning redevelopment.

Right after playing the video, Cheng Chi-Hung and other *videopower* members made fun of Shan Shan's leading question style and said, "when did you become a district board member?" Other constructive critiques on her shooting techniques as well as interviewing were also given.

Even though not every work was recognized as good production according to the organizers' standard, strong evidences of empowerment were shown during the sharing section. Here, I present the most representative ones,

Self-esteem-- John is an experienced tailor working in Wan Chai for many years. He has a production in progress, titled "Skills develop from experience" (工多藝熟)The

video is about his exceptional skills, such as cutting cloths blind, and his choreographic performance in using scissors. Before this video project, he didn't know he is so skillful because he knew many tailors in the area just like him. But his description of what he can do already surprised others in the sharing and won much admiration.

Knowledge and skills – Through workshops, the neighbors learnt something they had never thought of before (video making). Not only they can make video, they also developed a video appreciation capability though frequent screening (and certainly would not ask “why are they trying to fix the cloth all night” like the middle-age man did in “Sweet Life”.)

Self-efficacy and political participation– May Yip had gone to demonstrations, and went to the Housing Authority to negotiate with the officers. She not only believed that it is possible for her and her community to push for policy changes, but also became actively involved in political activities. She even “invented” her own way to utilize video technology – Taping the whole negotiation meeting with the government officers, so that they cannot get away from promises (Lee, 2002).

Political awareness – Because of making documentaries and later involvement in negotiations with government officers, Shan Shan has familiarized herself with the laws and policies of redevelopment. For example, in most cases, she can tell you roughly when will the district your live in be redeveloped, that was impressive.

Social participation – according to Wong, a social worker involved in the project, some active participants in the video-making group were never seen before in residents meetings. As a result, video did provide a new form of social participation. (Lee, 2002).

Resources – In material terms, *Videopower* provided the neighborhood with the necessary skills and equipments to make video. Besides, even more invaluable, the neighborhood now knows each other better, and are therefore better equipped for collective action.

6

Conclusion and Discussion

In the case of *Videopower*, digital video technology (such as DV cameras and non-linear editing) would be described as an “enabling factor” in communication technology research. An enabling factor is a factor that “makes an application possible” (Grant, 1998). Because of the user-friendliness and portability of DV camcorders, *Videopower* can teach virtually any group of people (such as the disabled, the teenage deaf, the middle-aged neighborhood) to make their own videos. Similarly, because of the availability and affordability of non-linear editing on desktop computers, *Videopower* can set-up editing facilities in the field.

Videopower itself does recognize video technology as an “enabling factor” in their empowerment work. “Now the price of camcorder dropped, one could buy it with just a month’s salary. In terms of equipment, *SONY* allows fringe media to have their material basis,” said Cheng Chi-Hung in the *Streetcorners* interview. If that is the case, then the obstacles towards empowerment mainly lies outside of the hardware technology realm.

As shown from the case of “Sweet Life Cultural Festival”, some of the videos they made could not really speak for themselves. Indeed, Cheng Chi-Hung would rather videos be “weak”, “Most of our videos are unfinished pieces. Communication schools taught us to make perfect cuts using all sorts of editing techniques, making simple and strong images. In this way, the video maker feels that he/she has achieved a lot, but we (*videopower*) always remind ourselves not to make videos so “powerful” (referring to the

video text itself). Because such powerfulness always inhibits dialog – works so nicely done do not provide space for discussion. When you are in the field, things do not progress linearly.” (Lee, 2002).

Rather than simply sending message to its audience, “bringing the audience back to the field” is the ideal Cheng wants to achieve through *Videopower* as a medium. Cheng is critical of the mainstream media and view it as far from being able to help the disadvantaged. “The current mass media does good tricks. On one hand, they report all sorts of news and information, but on the other, give people peace of mind. They let the audience think that they are done with an issue after reading newspaper and watching TV.” After all, activism is different from sitting in an air-conditioned screening room and analyzing shots rationally. When Wai-Yee learned that I am indeed a Master’s student, she told me “not to get too close with scholars who just speak but don’t act”. From my experience in this study, I do find that I learned a lot more about the issues talked about in the videos by going to the actual settings, meeting the actual people in the video (as in the Johnston Road project) rather than simply seeing it as a “performance” (in the Sweet Life Cultural Festival).

Rather than competing with the mainstream media, *Videopower’s* work has little to do with them. This may be reflected by Cheng’s own life—working in RTHK regularly while runs *Videopower*. But more importantly, their “concept of an audience” is completely different from the mainstream media’s view. Far from aiming at “capturing the largest audience possible”, as many mainstream media such as commercial TV do, *Videopower* is fundamentally selective in finding their audience. During the interview (Lee, 2002), when asked what he would do if some students (in the workshops), could not

think other than “calmly and logically”, he answered “Then nothing can be done, we are not here to “Po Do Chung Sang” (普渡眾生, a Buddhist term, meaning to “save everyone”) anyway. We are just trying to find the right people.”

Actually, in the medium of *Videopower*, the distinction between “audience” and “producer” is often broken down. In order to truly get their messages (or empowerment), you have to actively participate in their actions. In a way, this mode is similar to some community based on-line interactive media (such as bulletin boards, chat rooms, etc.), where the audience are often the producers as well. The biggest difference among them is perhaps that *Videopower* is a more active mediator, (for example, editing videos for their participants) than most online mediators (such as the manager of a bulletin board), and that they emphasize on off-line, real world effects. Their dilemma of wanting to disseminate their messages and at the same time finding the right “audience plus producer” people may explain their ambiguity of being inclusive (or exclusive) shown in this study. This ambiguity, together with the difficulties in finding out about them through more conventional channels (clicking on their web site, going to book stores), may inhibit their message dissemination. On the other hand, it may well serve as their current “screening mechanism” in finding the right targets (those who are determined and ready to participate in their agenda). This study also showed that *Videopower* has good networks with other fringe media (such as *Streetcorner*s) and activist groups (such as Rainbow of Hong Kong, HKFS, etc.). They often found their new audience/producers through their established network.

If we think of videos made on tapes, documenting the conditions, lives, feelings and original thoughts of the disadvantaged group an enough “channel for the voice of the disadvantaged”, *Videopower* has already succeed in that regard, with help from digital video technology. In terms of empowerment, however, the effectiveness varies greatly depending on how the material is used. In general, if the target group for empowerment has high participation in the production, the empowerment is high (as in the Johnston Road video project), while there is little or no empowerment if the producers are completely separated from the audience (as in the Sweet Life Cultural Festival). Further research could be done in testing the relationship between production participation and empowerment strength.

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