

Heinz Nigg (Ed.), **Rebel Video: The Video Movement of the 1970s and 1980s—London, Bern, Lausanne, Zürich, Basel**, Zürich, Switzerland: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2018, 396 pp., \$45.00 (paperback).

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Since the mid-2000s, researchers, scholars, and journalists have increasingly focused their attention on how activists utilize digital media and social media platforms (see, e.g., Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Tufekci, 2017). Much of this literature examines the potential radical alternative media have in animating movement participants and allies, challenging dominant social and political discourses, and promoting social and political change. The celebratory rhetoric once used to discuss digital media as “participatory culture” has, thankfully, mostly subsided (Jenkins, 2006), in favor of approaches that analyze alternative and community media within the social, political, and historical contexts in which they are produced and distributed (Rodriguez, Ferron, & Shamas, 2014). Despite this theoretical and methodological shift, there is still a tendency, particularly from media studies scholars, to posit alternative and community media as *new* phenomena.

Through a series of short essays, an oral history, and an online video archive, **Rebel Video: The Video Movement of the 1970s and 1980s—London, Bern, Lausanne, Zürich, Basel** offers a glimpse into an earlier era of community media, and is an excellent contribution to the field of alternative and community media.

In an introductory essay, Heinz Nigg, the book’s editor, argues that community video, or what he calls “grassroots” media, “cannot replace social organization,” but can complement it in important ways (pp. 21, 23). Avoiding a techno-utopian vision of community media, many of the interviewees in the oral history, instead, stress the social aspects of community video and explain how navigating interpersonal and intergroup differences was essential to the successes and challenges of the early community video movement. The book is structured geographically, with each city in the title of the book appearing as a section. The oral history, presented through interview portraits of various video collective members, comprises these sections. The layout and design of *Rebel Video* reflects the “low-tech” nature of community video. Still images from the oral history interviews are inserted throughout the text, which gives the reader a sense of the interviewees’ personalities. Additionally, stills from a variety of community films discussed in the book are inserted as breaks between sections. *Rebel Video* concludes with a series of short essays and



a video catalog, which directs readers to the companion website that includes the oral history interviews and films.<sup>1</sup>

The companion website is part of the London Community Video Archive (LCVA), curated by Nigg, Tony Dowmunt, and Andy Porter. Archiving community video from London and Switzerland in the 1970s and 1980s, the curators argue, preserves a "history from below," capable of spurring "contemporary discussions of community, race, gender, and identity, both at the community level and in the world of policy making and academic institutions" (p. 342). LCVA furthers this effort through public film screenings followed by panel discussions on issues raised in the films. The website features a blog from *Rebel Video's* "Tour 2018," which documents screenings and talks in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The tour places the history of community video in conversation with contemporary media activism, again highlighting the importance of the social processes inherent in community media. Some events from the tour were video recorded, so visitors to the blog can view video of the talks. Revealing how public screenings have the potential to stimulate meaningful and empathic public discourses about social justice is critical to understanding the social relations embedded in the production and distribution of alternative and community media (see, e.g., Canella, 2017).

Several interviewees in the oral history discuss the complicated relationship between community media and higher education, and explore a tension among action researchers, social scientists, and administrators. Christian Schmid, a former member of the Community Media project at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Zürich, discusses in his interview portrait a tension between science and action research. After he and his colleagues in the community media project filmed and screened videos of the opera house riots in May 1980, university administrators condemned the project and banned the students and instructors from using the video equipment for community media. Schmid, who is now professor of sociology at the Federal Institute of Technology Zürich, said in his interview, "It must be possible to test out alternative methods for research. It is not tolerable for politics to intervene in this process" (p. 242). This episode raises interesting questions about how the terms for community engaged research are negotiated and who has the authority to set them.

My critique of *Rebel Video* is two-fold: The first is the demographics of the oral history. Scholars have discussed how tech-savvy, well-educated White men often assume leadership positions within community media initiatives (Robé, 2017; Wolfson, 2014). The oral history repeatedly references the technological aspects of community media by describing how inexpensive portable video equipment, such as the Sony Portapak, lowered the financial barrier to entry, increased the speed at which alternative media could be produced and disseminated, and broke the grip that cultural and academic institutions had on film. However, rather than problematizing capitalist patriarchal logics, the book appears to reinforce them by featuring only three women (of 15) in the oral history.

My second critique is that, although the interviews from video artists and media practitioners thoroughly articulate the strengths and challenges of community media, the book does not connect these personal stories or analyze the themes that emerge from the oral history. For example, the

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.rebelvideo.ch](http://www.rebelvideo.ch)

institutionalization of community media is implicitly discussed when a video producer describes broadcasting community video on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom. In another example, an interviewee discusses the debate among community media practitioners about “process or product.” There is incredibly rich detail in *Rebel Video’s* oral history, but this detail could have benefited from brief essays that linked the interviewees and placed the LCVA in conversation with academic literature on alternative and community media. Reflective essays between sections could have moved the reader from one geographic location to the next and fleshed out the themes that emerged in the oral history. I do realize, though, that theorizing community media would have interrupted the oral history and altered the intended audience of the book.

With the analytical work left for the reader, undergraduate and graduate students in media studies and film, or in engaged communication research courses, would benefit from the book. Classroom exercises could include identifying themes within the oral history; situating contemporary media activism in its historical, social, and political contexts; and studying the process of curating online alternative archives. With increased demand for engaged research and social justice initiatives by universities and colleges, *Rebel Video* presents exciting opportunities for instructors, students, and media practitioners to examine how academic institutions promote (or oppose) radical pedagogies that fundamentally question inequality and power.

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