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High Hopes for Video

The UK Independent Film and Video Sector's Engagement with the Videocassette

In its relatively brief life span as a new media technology, video attracted considerable critical attention. In the UK much of the contemporaneous scholarly literature, journalism and promotional material focused on its potential as a production technology, its medium specificity or the home video boom. In 1980, for instance, Graham Wade published *Street Video*, which detailed the various ways in which five community based groups had started working with video as a relatively low-cost, portable technology that enabled them to document and campaign around a range of socio-political issues. Across the five groups discussed, the book offered compelling evidence for the ability of video to allow groups without access to the mass media to express their views. Others grappled with trying to identify what made video different from film or television. In 1988 Roy Armes undertook an in-depth study, *On Video*, to try and rescue video from the popular perception of it as simply a recording technology. By then the term 'video' had come to have multiple meanings and could, for instance, be applied to a feature film, an educational programme or a pop music promo. Armes argued that to understand video as medium in its own right it was necessary to locate video in a historical context, "within the whole spectrum of nineteenth- and twentieth-century audio, visual, and audio-visual media" (1). In the context of an emerging body of video art, UK artist David Hall endeavoured to highlight the distinctiveness of the medium by distinguishing between "art work *using* video" as a device to deliver pre-defined content and "video *as* the art work" (1978, 6) which exploited the characteristics of the medium itself – although as Armes observed, video's ongoing technological development meant any notion of a 'fixed identity' was challenging (1). Like Armes, Sean Cubitt in his 1991 book *Timeshift*

highlighted the difficulty in pinning down a single definition of 'video' but, in contrast to

Armes' historical approach, opted to explore the idea of a contemporary video *culture*, which

he envisaged as "a set of relations around the uses of videotape" (1). Alongside interrogations

of the nature of the new medium, still others turned their attention to the implications of its

take-up within the domestic context. Growing concerns in the early 1980s that uncertificated

films could be released for the home video market and be available, in theory, to children of

any age resulted in the 1984 Video Recordings Act which required video releases to be

certificated for home viewing. As the decade progressed, both industry experts and

academics went on to detail the rapid growth in home video and speculated about the size of

the market. In 1989 Julian Petley, for instance, argued that the UK video market was worth

£300 million a year (24).

However, two reports published in the early 1980s demonstrated a different kind of interest in

the new medium, albeit one that related to the home video boom. In 1983, the Greater

London Council (GLC) commissioned the report *Film and Video Exhibition and Distribution

in London* in recognition of what it saw as the pivotal role played by distribution and

exhibition in the UK's capital. Two of its key conclusions were, firstly, that film and video

distribution and exhibition was dominated "by the US majors and their English counterparts";

and secondly, that the only significant counter-weight to that domination was "provided by

the various institutions making up the independent sector" (Blanchard 22). In the UK, the

independent film and video sector was a loose grouping of organisations and individuals

engaged in the production, distribution and exhibition of non-mainstream and usually non-

commercial moving image material – from community video and documentary activism,

through experimental film and video art, to independent feature film production. What they

shared in common was a desire to open up spaces for those voices and practices marginalised

by or excluded from the mainstream film and television industries – something which had been marked by the setting up of their own campaigning umbrella organisation, the Independent Film-Makers' Association, in 1974 and later expanded to included video and photography. The GLC report argued that, overall, the independent sector had not prioritised distribution and was thus not reaching the wider potential audiences that might exist for its work. It concluded with a series of recommendations which included that the GLC should not only support the development of independent film and video distribution and exhibition generally in the London region, but should also support research that was being initiated by a group of video workshops and projects into the potential offered specifically by videocassette distribution (Blanchard 22).

The second report, entitled *The Videoactive Report* and published in 1985, was the direct result of that research, which was part funded by the GLC. The authors' brief was to report on the current state of video distribution practice in the independent sector nationally, with a particular aim to "investigate ways of reaching new audiences" in the light of "the growing market for programmes on videocassette" (Dovey and Dungey, 1.1). The report identified two key factors which had created the impetus for the research. First was that a significant amount of work was produced in the independent sector for largely local audiences in response to local issues but often had wider relevance – it was felt such work was both appropriate for and deserving of wider or national audiences. The second factor was people's growing familiarity with video which had resulted from the growth in the home video market and resulted in a widespread willingness to use video for a range of purposes (1.5).

At the heart of the interest in video evidenced in these two reports was the perceived distinctiveness of the videocassette and the seemingly huge potential it offered for enabling

non-mainstream moving image work to reach wider audiences. Although *The Videoactive Report* had focused primarily on the community and workshop sector, funders of artists' moving image and the artists themselves shared the interest in using the videocassette to reach wider audiences. Indeed, all funders of non-mainstream film and video were keen for the production work they funded to be seen by as wide an audience as possible. Not only did it make visible the fruits of their funding policies and initiatives, but new markets also produced new income streams which could potentially help support and sustain both community/workshop groups and individual creative practice.

Although it has since been debated whether seeking wider audiences is always desirable or appropriate (see, for instance, Coyer et al 224), the 1980s saw an enthusiasm for and resulting commitment to trying to use videocassette technology to make non-mainstream moving image work available and accessible to wider audiences, including the general public, particularly through public library schemes. That enthusiasm is evidenced in a range of institutional documents produced during the period – such as funding proposals from cultural organisations, funder initiated reports and publications, as well as minutes of committee meetings, internal memos and correspondence, in addition to the two reports mentioned above. Discussion of these documents and the rhetoric they employed form the focus of this article and the documents themselves are available for scrutiny online at the Film & Video Distribution Database (http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk).

Such documents are often written for specific purposes, of course, and are thus usually informed by particular agendas. While this means they cannot be taken unproblematically at face value, an examination of this historical material can nevertheless contribute to our broader understanding of moving image culture. The perceived need to provide an alternative

to dominant media forms and institutions, along with the desire to distribute non-mainstream material to wider audiences, form a recurring concern in moving image history. With regard to video, the 'high hopes' for its potential as a distribution medium resurfaced in the UK in the 1990s, with the growing domestic video retail market, and is evident in the promotional and marketing material produced by independent distributors and small-scale initiatives centred on artists' moving image work and art cinema. Furthermore, the 'high hopes' expressed in these UK documents from the 1980s and 1990s have been very clearly replicated in rhetoric that surrounded the advent of online distribution. But perhaps more importantly, the historical documents also flag up some of the limitations experienced by the video initiatives that online distributors and producers have similarly encountered.

The Potential of the Videocassette

Video tape originated as an open reel-to-reel technology which was unwieldy and impractical as a distribution medium. It was only with the advent of cassette based systems in the early 1970s that video's potential as a distribution medium started to become apparent and, in the UK, triggered interest and gave rise to a need to better understand and exploit that potential. On the one hand a number of proposals for video distribution initiatives started to emerge, largely in recognition of the fact that there were no existing facilities equipped to distribute work originated on video tape. In the space of a year, for instance, the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) received at least three applications for funding to research or set up video distribution initiatives. In March 1976 community video activists Sue Hall and John 'Hoppy' Hopkins submitted a proposal to carry out research prior to making an application for setting up a video distribution facility;[1] while towards the end of that year, the Arts Council also received applications from the newly formed London Video Arts (LVA) to set up a

production, exhibition and distribution centre for video artists,[2] and from the independent studio Aidanvision to set up a video resource centre that would include tape distribution.[3] At the same time independent film distributors were starting to take on board the possibility of distributing video work.[4] On the other hand, awareness was dawning that videocassette technology could be used to distribute work originated on film. As Hall and Hopkins observed in their application to the ACGB: "In Sweden, videocassette is already regarded as a delivery vehicle for material originated on film, particularly Super-8" (1).

But it was the favouring of VHS technology in the domestic market, combined with a dramatic growth in VCR penetration,[5] in the first half of the 1980s that prompted wider awareness of the full potential that the videocassette offered and the distinct advantages it had over celluloid film. It quickly became apparent that VHS cassettes were very easy to distribute – unlike canisters of film, they weighed very little and were highly portable, possible to hand carry or send through the post at minimal cost. Furthermore, the technology was very flexible – monitors could be plugged in anywhere, existing television sets could be used and there was no need for blackout. As the authors of *The Videoactive Report* observed: "Video distribution is different, it is not the same as film distribution" (Dovey and Dungey 1.5). Although both film prints and videocassettes could provide the means of distributing moving image content, they went on to argue that:

> [B]y comparison with a film print, video copies are extremely cheap. Thus film prints are usually rented out, whereas increasingly video cassettes are purchased outright by the user or rented at a much lower price. Thus in purely economic terms, video cassettes can be located closer to books or records than to film. (Dovey and Dungey 1.5)

The comparison with books is one that recurs. In another report, *London Industrial Strategy: The Cultural Industries*, published by the Greater London Council (GLC), also in 1985, the authors noted: "The emergence of videos for sale at around £10 … is liable to turn videos into a commodity more like a book" (23). Thus in a few short years, video as a distribution medium became an easy to use consumer technology, requiring only readily available playback equipment and no specialist skills. The potential this offered for distributing alternatives to the narrow range of content provided by the mainstream film and television industries was amply demonstrated in the UK by the case of *The Miners Campaign Tapes* (1984) (Knight 23–24). These were a series of short videos made by a group of independent film- and video-makers during the 1984 miners' strike against pit closures. The tapes were made in collaboration with the striking miners, their families and supporters in order to counter the anti-strike propaganda that was dominating the mass media. For *The Miners Campaign Tapes* to be effective, getting the tapes seen by as many people as possible – that is, prioritising distribution and exhibition – was an absolute necessity. Employing extensive networking and word of mouth resulted in around four to five thousand copies being circulated in the UK, with still more going overseas (Coyer et al 38–39). This provided a dramatic contrast to the findings of a survey conducted by the *Videoactive* researchers which revealed that of the community/workshop material then available on cassette, "over 80% of titles … sold less than five copies in a year" (Dovey and Dungey, Summary of Main Conclusions, 3). Although, due to the nature of the project, many of *The Miners Campaign Tapes* were given away for free,[6] the high number of copies circulated seem to point not only to substantial and previously untapped potential markets for non-mainstream moving image material, but also to the possibility of video distribution becoming a significant source of income – *if* distribution was prioritised. This was an attractive prospect for anyone

distributing 16mm film in the UK, where relatively low rental charges and high print costs made it difficult to cover overheads.

From the initial interest that emerged in the mid-late 1970s, there was a marked shift in less than 10 years from a sense of dealing with a new and unfamiliar technology to an understandable excitement around the possibilities that had become far more evident as the videocassette became a very familiar consumer product. It was in this context that a number of initiatives employing videocassette technology were set up to try and build wider audiences for non-mainstream moving image work.

Enabling Access and Expanding Choice

Various institutional documents and reports suggest initiatives were undertaken which ranged from mail order through to getting videos into record stores, bookshops and libraries (GLC, 1985; Dovey and Dungey, 1985; GLEB, 1986; see also Knight and Thomas, 111), but these initiatives met with varying degrees of success. While the level of detail varies considerably across the documents, it is evident that despite the parallel drawn with books and the emphasis on the growing home market, experiments in bookshops proved disappointing. In 1985, for instance, Tony Kirkhope and Ben Gibson at independent distributor The Other Cinema reported they had trialled a "video in bookshops" scheme, targeted at radical bookshops, which had failed due to "high unit cost of videos; narrow range; lack of interest from target group".[7] This perceived failure was also reported by the *Videoactive* authors (Dovey and Dungey, Section 4.2).

Where the parallel with books seemed to work well was in the setting up of library schemes, and two models emerged. On the one hand, there were so-called Video Access Libraries, which found favour with and were supported by the Arts Council of Great Britain. These were effectively reference libraries, set up around the country, located in cultural or arts venues, and made arts based material available – including the Arts Council's own arts documentary tapes, as well as artists' film and video work which it had funded – to the general public for watching on the premises. On the other hand, there was a drive, favoured by the Greater London Council (GLC) and others, to utilise the pre-existing infrastructure of the public library service in order to provide video loan schemes for community and workshop material – of which the GLC was a major regional funder. Both schemes were aimed at building new audiences for non-mainstream moving image work, especially among the general public.

While both schemes made a small charge to users, they were promoted in slightly different terms. The rhetoric around the Video Access Libraries (VALs) tended to use the notion of 'enabling access', suggesting the arts based material was already 'available' but only to particular (usually institutional) audiences and the VALs were facilitating access to this pre-existing material for wider (general public) audiences. In contrast, discussion of video in public libraries tended to favour the idea of 'expanding choice'. This stemmed from the nature of the community and workshop material which was being produced to counter the limited range of viewpoints and content offered by the mainstream film and television industries and promote greater cultural diversity. Despite these conceptual differences informing the rhetoric, the idea that video was a democratic medium underpinned both schemes.

Video Access Libraries

The first permanent Video Access Libraries in the UK were opened in 1981 – one at
London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in April of that year, followed by a second at
Bristol's Arnolfini arts centre in October – with further Libraries following in the next two to
three years, in Nottingham, Newcastle and Southend. These were in fact preceded by
temporary initiatives in the context of video art shows, which had already indicated some
general public interest. In the summer of 1980, for instance, London Video Arts (LVA)
offered "open access" to their videotape library during a two-day show at London's Acme
Gallery, whereby members of the public could walk in off the street and request to view
individual tapes. In reporting back to the artists whose work they distributed, LVA noted that
"the interest was lively" and "exceeded our expectations".[8] Indeed, the experiment was
deemed sufficiently successful, that LVA felt it worthwhile to repeat it the following year,
extending open access for "members of the public" to a whole week in the context of a two
week show at London's AIR Gallery.[9]

The rationale for opening the permanent Video Access Libraries (VAL) and the emphasis in
their publicity material were likewise very much centred on the promise of 'access' for the
general public. In 1981, when Rod Stoneman applied to the Arts Council for funding to set
up Arnolfini's VAL, he argued: "The aim of the library … is to provide permanent and public
access to audio-visual material not generally or easily available".[10] In a similar vein, when
the ICA advertised an open meeting in March 1981 to publicise the imminent opening of its
VAL, it asserted that: "The aim is to make available to the general public … a wide range of
video-tapes concerned with the arts which at present receive little or no exposure".[11] Indeed,
it is possible to argue that the concern with 'access' formed such a central, overriding focus

that initially the interests of the video artists and filmmakers whose work was to be included in the libraries were side-lined. Some of those in distribution with LVA felt the terms being offered by the ICA and the Arnolfini, for instance, for depositing their tapes in the library were particularly unfavourable.[12]

While the Video Access Libraries were promoted in terms of the access they offered, the rhetoric employed also stressed the uniqueness of that access. This emphasis on the fact that the Libraries were offering something entirely new crops up time and again. In advertising its 1981 open meeting, the ICA maintained that its VAL "is a unique development, the first of its kind in Britain".[13] Six months after it opened, the Arnolfini issued a Library catalogue supplement in which it described the VAL as both an "innovative resource" and "a radically new type of resource" (Arnolfini 1). And the Arts Council, as a key funder of the Libraries, repeatedly stressed their unique character. In 1982, the Arts Council's Film Officer Rodney Wilson used it as a means of rationalising support for them: "Our support was considered and agreed on the basis that the Libraries were a new way of making artists film and video available to the public. Indeed, they represent the only public access to the work".[14] Two years later, the Arts Council's Assistant Film Officer David Curtis developed the argument further, drawing on terminology that has become common in the digital era: "Uniquely these libraries make artists' work available on demand, thus overcoming the restriction of 'performance' schedules".[15]

Unsurprisingly, given their dependence on public subsidy to operate, the VALs were keen to demonstrate they were being well used, and the promotional rhetoric of 'access' was followed by both implicit and explicit assertions that the Libraries were 'meeting a need'. In a 1982 supplement to its initial library catalogue, for instance, the Arnolfini declared: "The

first six months of the Arnolfini Video Library has seen considerable interest in the independently made videotapes and films on tape available" (1). In a particularly detailed report to the Arts Council 12 months later, the Arnolfini explained:

> The busiest days are, like everything else in this building, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. We have many enquiries for use at lunchtime and between two and four, and the indications are that the Library would be fully used if it were open longer hours. … we receive many enquiries from users as to the availability of similar libraries elsewhere in the country. This suggests that many of the users are from outside Bristol. The most recent general profile of users of Arnolfini gave 40% as from outside Bristol.[16]

This suggests that the Library's users had simply been waiting for such a facility, for access to such work, and that there was considerable demand for similar facilities around the country. Indeed, the Arnolfini's claims were to a certain extent supported by the viewing figures it regularly supplied to the Arts Council. A report sent in November 1982, for instance, providing a breakdown of the viewing figures for the Arts Council's own arts documentary tapes over a 7-month period, showed that the Council's 33 tapes had been watched a total of 331 times, which meant that each tape was watched an average of 10 times, with *Ubu* (Geoff Dunbar, 1978) attracting the highest viewings at 63.[17] Another report, sent five months later in March 1983, detailed the usage of both experimental film transferred to video and video art tapes and reported that the total of 36 tapes had been watched 442 times in total (although the time period is not specified), meaning each tape was watched on average around 12 times, with *The News* (Ian Breakwell, 1980) proving the most popular with 47 views and *Associations* (John Smith, 1975) a close second at 40 views.[18] While these

viewing figures seem very small in the contemporary era of online distribution, both the Arnolfini and the Arts Council regarded them as clear indicators of the success of the initiative. Based solely on the first 7 month's viewing figures for the Arts Council's documentary tapes, the Arnolfini asserted that the tapes were "evidently fulfilling a need",[19] while at the Arts Council, Film Officer Rodney Wilson asserted, "I think that the results are extremely good and vindicate the experiment completely."[20]

Drawing partly on the evidence of these early viewing figures, the Arts Council started to utilise more forward looking rhetoric that conveyed an imagined future with much expanded access to arts based film and video. In May 1982, faced with possible cuts in funding to the Arts Council's own budgets and keen to defend the future of the VALs, Wilson drew up an internal report in which he argued that: "In the long term a network of [video access] libraries would create a completely new system of distribution".[21] And he reiterated a similar view a few months later in November 1982: "It is going to be one of the distribution formats of the future".[22] As if confirming Wilson's conviction – at least partially – less than three years later the Arnolfini opened a new purpose built space for their VAL in order to extend and improve the service it was providing.[23]

Public Library Service

In 1982, the Library Association Audio-Visual Group conducted a survey of the development of video collections in public libraries. While the number of library authorities engaging with video was still relatively small, their libraries were tending to stock predominantly popular entertainment, comparable to the selection available in any high street video rental store, and charging for the loan service with a view to making it self-financing (Dovey and Dungey

6.5.2). When the *Videoactive* researchers revisited the situation two years later, the number of library authorities developing video collections had almost doubled, but libraries had found it difficult to compete with the rapidly changing stock of high street stores and some had closed or 'frozen' their collections (Dovey and Dungey 6.5.3).

At the same time, however, some libraries had become interested in stocking non-fiction material, especially if it was locally produced. This was partly as a way of differentiating their video services from those offered on the high street, but also because it was a good fit with the educational remit of the public library service. In this climate, *The Videoactive Report* argued that many libraries would be interested in community and workshop material, since some of this material was produced by local groups, frequently dealt with issues of local or regional relevance and would complement their existing collections of other material: "libraries almost always have local studies or local history collections and would be interested in tapes which related to this, often already having archives of photographs." Furthermore, the *Videoactive* authors highlighted the way in which public libraries also provided multiple potential routes to regional audiences across the country: "Different public library services have a range of links with local adult education, museum services, services to schools, with arts, recreation or community information and groups" (Dovey and Dungey 6.5.3).

In the London region, the interest of library authorities in stocking non-fiction, educational material connected very easily with the recommendations in the above mentioned 1983 report, *Film and Video Exhibition and Distribution in London*, that the Greater London Council (GLC) should support the development of independent film and video distribution and exhibition (Blanchard 22). Its willingness to act on these recommendations was part of a

wider strategy being developed by the GLC to support the cultural industries in London and resulted in video distribution being targeted – via the GLC's financial investment wing, the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB) – as a key area for support during 1985–86.[24]

As noted above, in contrast to the promise of 'access' that surrounded the launch of the Video Access Libraries, various reports which discussed utilising the public library service to distribute community and workshop material focused on its potential for widening or expanding 'choice' for the general public. In a 1984 report detailing its strategy for supporting cultural industries projects, for instance, the GLC noted the existence of a number of pilot projects in libraries "for hiring out a much wider range of videos than is available in the high street shops".[25] In another report, published the following year, it more confidently asserted that libraries "have the resources and expertise to stock much wider ranges of product than the high street shops" (Greater London Council 26). Also published in 1985, *The Videoactive Report* similarly stressed that "Independent distribution of video through the library service, both for home viewing and promoting group viewing, is central to providing alternatives to existing media" (Dovey and Dungey 6.5.4).

Although getting video into public libraries utilised an existing and long-established infrastructure, the potential of video in this context was also seen as part of what was perceived to be a technological revolution. In a 1984 report outlining its film and video policy, the GLC observed, for instance, that "The field of distribution and exhibition is undergoing a rapid technological switchover".[26] At the same time, the potential of video as a distribution medium was seen as integrally connected to its potential as a production technology. In a flyer for a conference the following year, the GLC flagged up the wider possibilities presented by new technologies such as video for expanding cultural diversity:

For the new technologies now make it possible – for all those who wish – to make

their own cassette tapes, publish their own small books and magazines, produce their

own video television programmes, outside of the market-place which is currently

dominated by the multi-national companies.[27]

For the GLC, utilising new technologies, such as the video cassette, to expand 'choice' for

audiences was an obvious and logical extension of its commitment to expanding cultural

diversity at the level of production.

Even where the new technologies were not directly referenced in discussions of the public

library service, the rhetoric employed conveyed a strong sense that video was facilitating – or

could facilitate – something that older technologies could not. In a report published in 1986,

Altered Images: Towards a Strategy for London's Cultural Industries, for instance, GLEB

observed that "The huge potential of the public library service for increasing the availability

of video is only just being explored" (GLEB, 17). Video technology enabled the use of the

public library service for the distribution and circulation of moving image material in a way

that celluloid film had not and indeed could not. GLEB's observation implicitly conveys the

enormity of that realisation and the perception of the video cassette as a potentially

revolutionary technology.

The suggestion that the technology had created entirely new possibilities is, of course, also

evident in some of the Arts Council's rhetoric when discussing the Video Access Libraries,

particularly in the notion of making work available 'on demand'. While 'on demand' is

something we now associate very much with online distribution, in the 1980s the 'on

demand' availability stemmed partly from being able to walk in off the street and select a video to watch – but, importantly, it also resulted from the new, easy to use technology that did not require the services of a trained projectionist. Thinking through the implications of the technology further, in 1985 the ACGB's Film Officer Rodney Wilson also asserted – in some extraordinarily visionary thinking which anticipates the digital era – that, "Once installed, the catalogue of contents of a Video Access Library is infinitely extendable".[28] Although this obviously overstated the reality – as physical objects, video cassettes require space, just as books do – he was clearly invoking a comparison with the bulky nature of film canisters and the special storage conditions celluloid film requires.

Indeed, in the interests of exploring the full potential of video, the Arts Council also experimented with the public library service by setting up a Video Access Library at Southend Central Library in the south east county of Essex. Although couched in terms of 'enabling access' rather than 'expanding choice', the promotional rhetoric continued to suggest that the use of video created new possibilities. On opening the Southend VAL in June 1987, for instance, Arts Council Secretary-General Luke Rittner – echoing Assistant Film Officer David Curtis' earlier assertion – was quoted in the local press coverage as observing that "it is the first time the public can view on demand films made by the Arts Council".[29] In contrast to the early feedback from the Arnolfini, however, reports from Southend Central Library proved disappointing. The minutes of a meeting in February 1988, reviewing the first six months of the VAL, reported that it had not met with a huge public response[30] and had been used only 160 times since opening[31] – around half the usage the Arnolfini achieved over a comparable period. A year later, Arts Council correspondence reporting on a subsequent review meeting noted that there had been "slow but consistent use", "it could be much

better"[32] and "[t]hings are not developing as well as they might, with little increase in use on the first year".[33]

Issues Arising and Lessons Learnt

One of the reasons the Arts Council pursued the project of setting up a VAL in a public library was that problems were starting to emerge with the existing VALs that had been set up in arts centres. By 1986, there were a total of five VALs across the UK – one each in London, Bristol and Nottingham and two in Newcastle – and in most cases, they were experiencing issues with the level of support the library needed, not only in terms of staff to run it but also with the effort required to promote it and ensure its visibility to potential users. As early as January 1986, for instance, the Arts Council's Film and Video Officer David Curtis and colleague Will Bell wrote to the Council's training committee asserting that "a major and persistent problem" in the development of regional VALs "has been the conspicuous lack of administrators with experience of Video Access Library work (with its particular organisational and technological problems) and the necessary knowledge of the extensive area of film/video work".[34] For Curtis, the problem was sufficiently serious to merit the urgent need to set up a training programme for VAL staff in order to ensure the libraries were operated effectively.

By the time the Arts Council were considering setting up a sixth VAL in Wolverhampton in late 1987, its Film Education Services Officer Will Bell was able to specify in advance that the library would need a full-time member of staff, with specialist knowledge of the content of the tapes in the library. Bell stressed that subject knowledge was "not simply good customer relations but also allows for the formulation of a good and coherent purchasing

policy". Furthermore, he asserted that: "It has become apparent that access as a resource has to be highly visible if it is to be successful. … Consequently, a visual display promoting the resource is very important." Bell also quite specifically stated that "any attempt to integrate the library activity and say bookshop work is just not feasible".[35] Thus in the course of their support for and involvement with VALs during the 1980s, the Arts Council had developed a very sophisticated understanding of what was required to make them work effectively. Bell's point about integrating a VAL into a book shop stemmed directly from the Arts Council's experience with the Arnolfini arts centre in Bristol. When the Arnolfini was refurbished in the summer of 1987, the VAL had lost its dedicated and purpose built space and was incorporated into the centre's book shop, with only two monitors in a corner and shelving storing the tapes.[36] By the time Bell was negotiating with the Wolverhampton venue a few months later, the Arts Council already felt that the VAL had effectively become invisible – and indeed this was borne out by the viewing figures. In 1986–87, prior to the Arnolfini's refurbishment, viewing figures had been up at 1115; but for the corresponding period in 1987–88 post refurbishment, the viewing figures had fallen dramatically to just 299, a drop of around 70%.[37]

A large part of the early success of Arnolfini's VAL had been down to the combination of knowledgeable staff and a willingness of the venue's management to programme events that drew on or complemented material in the VAL. Rod Stoneman, for instance, who had put together the original funding application for the Arnolfini's VAL, had been a member of the London Film-makers' Co-op during the 1970s where he had been involved in developing initiatives to build audiences for the Co-op's library of experimental film[38] and had also organised the second Independent Filmmakers Tour of the South West in 1978.[39] The Arnolfini had also programmed a series of events around the initial opening of the VAL in

1981 and again around the relaunch in its purpose built space in 1985; while the Arts Council's documentaries were frequently used to provide background information or contextual screenings to the presentation of the work of a particular artist at the centre. Furthermore, information about the VAL was also included in the Arnolfini's regular programme booklet for the whole venue, alongside the library's own issuing of a catalogue and supplement updates. This gave the Arnolfini's VAL a high degree of visibility and by 1983 they reported that "users often approach the Library supplement in hand, with their preferred titles ringed".[40]

Conversely, the failure of the VAL at Southend Central Library to develop its usage was attributed to precisely a lack of promotional activity to help build its visibility. At the review meeting held in February 1988, several marketing ideas had been discussed, including "mounting a touring exhibition of stills and information about the video access library to other libraries in the region", establishing links with regional schools and colleges, and using the Central Library's lecture theatre "to develop a combined programme".[41] However, by the following year these initiatives had failed to materialise, and the Arts Council felt that was due to "fluctuations in staffing levels",[42] which resulted in the library not having sufficient resources to properly support its VAL and promote it to potential users.

At least three key issues emerge from this history that have resonance in the contemporary era of online digital distribution. Firstly, from the documentation discussed above, it becomes evident relatively quickly that simply enabling access – or expanding choice – to work with which the general public may not already be familiar does not in and of itself build audiences. As Sue Hall and John 'Hoppy' Hopkins had argued, with some foresight, in their 1976 proposal for researching the setting up of a video distribution facility, "We think that

audiences for video have to be created from the potential audiences in arts centres, galleries, community centres, colleges, festivals, exhibition and broadcast TV" (emphasis in the original).[43] The Arts Council may have been fortunate with the Arnolfini, in that it already had staff with relevant subject knowledge and marketing expertise, but the Council's own documentation demonstrates a growing awareness and understanding of the need to *build* audiences for non-mainstream film and video, and the high level of support and promotional activity that requires. With the advent of the internet, it quickly became apparent that, similarly, simply making material available online did not create an audience for it, and cultural producers – amateur and professional alike – had to invest time and effort to find ways of driving potential audiences to their content.

It also becomes evident from some documentation that while the library schemes were used, they did not produce significant levels of income. Figures compiled by the Arts Council in 1984 compared the income generated through institutional hires of their arts documentaries and income generated from viewings at the Arnolfini's Video Access Library. In the full year of 1983, there had been 2001 institutional bookings, which produced a net income for the Arts Council of £14,386.03.[44] Over a 10 month period across 1983–84, there had been a total of 924 viewings at the Arnolfini – just under half the number of institutional bookings – which in contrast had generated a mere £174.88 in net income due to the much lower pricing necessary to attract members of the public to use the resource. The Arnolfini had rationalised that a nominal charge for video viewing was necessary in order to "encourage 'serious' viewing", but felt that "tape viewing costs should be kept considerably lower than Arnolfini cinema ticket prices as there is no existing tradition for the paid viewing of video".[45] With their lower level of usage, Southend Central Library argued that "Charging is derisory in income terms", but felt it did at least stop abuse of the facility.[46] Although the scale of

circulation achieved by *The Miners Campaign Tapes* had suggested that there could be considerable potential sources of income to be earned by non-mainstream moving image material, those tapes benefited from a particular set of circumstances that were virtually impossible to replicate for most other material. As the *Videoactive* researchers noted: "The urgency of the strike forged greater unity and collaboration and pushed people into finding new audiences and ways to distribute tapes" (Dovey and Dungey, Section 6.2.11). Thus by 1987, in his discussions with the Wolverhampton venue for a possible VAL, Will Bell clearly wanted to dispel any possible notion that VALs could be self-sustaining, asserting that: "Access libraries must be seen as a public service and educational resource; they simply do not make money".[47] In a similar manner Chris Anderson (2009, 253–54) in his book *The Longer Long Tail*, which explores online distribution, found that the ability to make material available via the internet may produce a more varied culture with which people will engage, but does not automatically translate into generating a significant income.

The third issue that emerges is the often unanticipated problems that can arise with the widespread adoption of a new media technology and can limit what is perceived to be the potential of that technology. With the Video Access Libraries, tapes had to be watched on the premises, whereas the public library service preferred a loan scheme whereby people could borrow tapes for viewing in their own homes. In the early discussions between the Arts Council and Southend Central Library, the latter had asked if the Arts Council would be willing to sell VHS cassette copies of their arts documentaries to the library for home loan, explaining that "This would bring your material to a wider audience".[48] While the Arts Council clearly saw video's potential to widen audiences for their documentaries, Film Officer Rodney Wilson explained that home loan presented them with two problems: "One is the question of rights clearance, particularly in relation to the media unions and the other is

the question of the effect that the Video Recordings Act will have". For those reasons, he went on, "we are not getting involved in home distribution on video at all for the time being".[49] Similarly, the early promise of online film distributors, such as MUBI, that users would be able to watch films 'anytime, anywhere' has had to be curtailed due to digital rights management issues and the practice of geo-blocking.

While many of the documents discussed above evidence a strong sense of excitement around new possibilities and a willingness to experiment, not to mention some visionary thinking that seems very prescient of the contemporary era of online distribution, the initiatives clearly encountered problems and did not pan out as envisaged. Nevertheless, the 'high hopes' for video resurfaced in the 1990s with a range of retail initiatives aimed at building home markets for artists' moving image and art cinema. In 1990, for instance, the British Film Institute launched its own label, Connoisseur Video, and at the launch event BFI Chairman Sir Richard Attenborough reiterated the potential of video to expand choice, by stressing the need "to take note of the great opportunities that home-video offers to bring a greater range of films than any other delivery system can to the discerning viewer".[50] Three years later, in 1993, Anthony Howell launched *Grey Suit*, a magazine on VHS which distributed the work of film- and video-makers, as well as writers and performers. In promotional material, Howell stressed the level of access enabled by his mail order initiative, asserting that *Grey Suit* offered purchasers "an exceptional opportunity to build their own library of contemporary film, video, slide dissolve pieces, performances and creative experiments".[51] Thus the 1980s notion of using video technology to create *public* access to non-mainstream moving image work took a step nearer the age of the internet with the emerging concept of a *personal* library, accessible from and in one's own home.

With the advent of online distribution the rhetoric of enabling access and widening choice resurfaced yet again, and at one level seemed to deliver in that a huge range of moving image material is now easily available online at 'anytime anywhere'. However, as indicated above, online distribution initiatives have had to address similar issues and face similar limitations to those faced by the 1980s proponents of video distribution. It is also worth noting that the above history also offers an example of video technology providing a level of access that the internet has failed to match. As funding became available in the UK for digitisation projects, the Arts Council collaborated with the University of Westminster to digitise their collection of arts documentaries and these are now online at the Arts on Film Archive (http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk). However, while catalogue information about the films is freely accessible to anyone, due to rights issues the films themselves can only be accessed via a UK Further or Higher Education internet connection or log-in. In contrast, although a Video Access Library required users to travel to the venue, once there anyone from anywhere in the world could watch the films. Thus, exploring the history of video distribution can provide a historical framework within which to better understand both the potential and the limitations of online moving image distribution.

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