

Producing Alternative Media:
My Work As a Freelance Filmmaker
By Kamanaka Hitomi*

1. MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH ‘ALTERNATIVE MEDIA’

The word ‘alternative’ in the English term *alternative media* is difficult to translate directly into Japanese. Broadly speaking, it suggests that which replaces, substitutes, or adds to something. It suggests an approach that is different from the mainstream approach, one that puts forth the existence of a different kind of value system. This need not mean that alternative methods must stand in opposition to the mainstream; rather, they can be said to supplement what is missing in the mainstream.

An *alternative media*, then, would be a media that makes possible what is ordinarily not doable in the mass media. Rejecting the idea that one method is absolute and all encompassing, alternative media is grounded in the acceptance and actualization of multiplicity. In the context of the multiplicity of our present society, there is a great need for such an alternative media.

The reality of free media

There are, however, a variety of obstacles that stand in the way of sustaining an alternative media. Filmmaking is a costly endeavor that requires extraordinary amounts of capital. Whereas in the mass media, returns on the incurred production costs are guaranteed by the mechanisms of the commercial marketplace, in the case of alternative media, the process must first begin with procuring the funds for production. While using high quality equipment will ensure high quality images, this is impossible for makers of alternative media, leaving creators of alternative media to seek other means of producing a good product. The most crucial factor in making an alternative media, even while being saddled with this extra handicap, is the determination of an author to portray a truth invisible in mass media, that is, the author’s own truth. Taking a broad look at the history of documentary film in Japan, one can see that the profit motive has not been the only driving force in the production of films. In this history, we can see that makers of alternative media have always existed, like an underground current flowing just under the surface.

Take, for example, the 1967 government project to construct Narita International Airport, in which land was forcefully seized from local farmers at Sanrizuka, in Chiba Prefecture. When local farmers and student sympathizers rose up in protest to the expropriation of their land, the government mobilized a riot police of 30,000 to contain them. An intense struggle ensued for days. Ogawa Shinsuke, leader of Ogawa Productions, went on location with his cameras during the early stages of the struggle and in 1968, completed and released the film, *Summer in Narita*. (“Nihon kaihō sensen—Sanrizuka no natsu,” 1968). This groundbreaking documentary, as Ogawa himself

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described it, was “shot entirely from within the farmer’s protest lines, from their perspective. And when I was filming the authorities on the other side, I shot straight on, in direct confrontation with them, staking the camera's raison d'être on this stance.”¹

Ogawa’s manner of filming was not found anywhere else in the mainstream media. His Ogawa Productions subsequently organized independent screenings of the film by supporters of the protest movement across the nation, transporting the film by caravan throughout the country. The film was not channeled along the established screening venues; rather, the screenings became part of the larger collaborative work between the filmmaker and its viewers. Just at this period, the citizen’s movements that would become the foundational base of an alternative media were on the rise. Also during this time, the practice of independently screening films within grassroots movements was spreading. After filming of the Sanrizuka series,² however, Ogawa Productions was left with a massive debt. Such was the cost of independence from commercial capital.

Another example is director Tsuchimoto Noriaki, who went on location in 1965 to the fishing village of Minamata³ to report the situation there for television coverage. But, reflecting on his own problematic reporting approach as an outside observer, he decided to move and live in Minamata starting in 1970, from which he produced a 2 hour and 51 minute feature-length documentary film called *Minamata: The Patients and Their World*. (“Minamata: kanja-san to sono sekai,” 1972). The film, made in support of the patients with Minamata disease, was praised as “capturing the soul of each and every patient,” and for its ability to “show the dignity of human beings who live in the most desperate of conditions, while at the same time showing the extent to which not just one company, the Chisso Corporation, but the entire Japanese capitalist system destroys human beings and the environment for the sake of profit.”⁴ Abandoning his television assignment, Tsuchimoto immersed himself in the movement to support patients with Minamata disease. He was consistently at the forefront of the protests against the Health and Welfare Ministry, experiencing arrest and detention. But while being at the center of the movement, he never ceased his work of making films; the movement and filmmaking had become one and the same.

Experiences in independent production

It was in this manner that beginning in the latter half of the 1960s, films were made by independent productions backed neither by television nor by large studios. The period’s big social issues were the themes that the makers of these films took up, such as

¹ *Ogawa Shinsuke: shineasto wa kataru* 5. Ogawa Shinsuke, commentary by Hasumi Shigehiko. (Shinematêku, Fûrindô, 1993)

² The Sanrizuka series was comprised of a total of seven films made over ten years, all documenting the farmer’s struggle against the government take over of their land. “Summer in Narita” (1968) was the first in the series. [tr]

³ The fishing village of Minamata was the site of severe mercury poisoning, caused by contamination from the industrial wastewaters of the Chisso Corporation. Minamata disease, a neurological disease caused by mercury poisoning in the local ecosystem, was first discovered in 1956. A second outbreak of Minamata disease had broken out in 1965. [tr]

⁴ *Kôza: Nihon eiga 5. Sengo eiga no tenkai*. Satô Tadao ed. (Iwanami Shoten, 1987).

widespread campus protests and Anpo protests,⁵ yielding original and vibrant new films. These people were precisely the alternative media makers of their time.

But the work of constructing alternative media is similar to sowing seeds in the wilderness. My own early work with an independent film production company involved screening a particular film produced by an independent production. The film, entitled *What lies at the foundation of education*⁶ (“Kyôiku no kontei ni aru mono,” 1984) was a three-and-a-half-hour, feature-length documentary. The production company, established by a community of like-minded people for the purpose of making films about issues in education, brought attention to the dynamism of the late Hayashi Takejii’s lectures, and documented the lectures he gave on his nation-wide tours.

What lies at the foundation of education was a film centered on the documenting of Hayashi Takeji’s lectures. With such unspectacular subject matter, how were we going to bring in an audience? We had to pool together all our wits and do a lot of legwork. Unlike television programs, which are automatically broadcast in an established set up, we had to see the film through with our own hands all the way to its screening. But it was also for that reason that we could feel the immediate response of the viewers. Tangible audience response is always what forces us, as makers of film, to keep in mind who the media is for, and why the subject matter has to be conveyed. Along the way, there are many obstacles to be overcome, such as getting the funding, doing cost-effective reporting, and overcoming the criticism from the establishment. But it was, of course, precisely the presence of these obstacles that made us an alternative media.

This was my first experience of filmmaking, and through this early encounter with alternative media, the direction I would take in my own filmmaking would take shape.

My Encounter with Paper Tiger Television

Since then, I have done freelance work in film production without being affiliated with any television studios or production companies. For the two years from 1993-1995, I lived in New York and was active with a group called Paper Tiger Television. Paper Tiger is a video production collective whose aim is to create what cannot be done in mainstream media through producing an alternative media. In this organization, media activists critique the state of the present media and cooperate with various citizens’ groups in order to produce programming that the mass media will not produce.⁷

Paper Tiger programs are made primarily through the work of volunteers. During the time that I was there, there were about ten people who were regular participants in making the programs aside from the organization’s full-time staff. In weekly meetings, the program’s content, focus, and style were discussed and decided upon. People from various positions and ethnicities and backgrounds submitted their ideas, and all opinions were treated equally. Most importantly, it was the existence of the differences in opinions that was seen to make it worthwhile to listen to one another’s ideas. Decisions were made by a majority vote. Those who were not present at the meeting gave up their right to object to the decisions made in their absence.

⁵ Massive protests against renewal of the ANPO (US Japan Security Treaty) took place in 1960. [tr]

⁶ Directed by Shinomiya Tetsuo, Gurûpu Gendai, 1984.

⁷ See part 3, ch.1 of *Media riterashii wo manabu hito no tame ni*. Suzuki Midori ed. (Sekai shisôsha, 1997).

Of the organization's members, I was the only one at the time who had professional filmmaking experience. Rather than the generation of profit, Paper Tiger's main focus was on making programs that the citizens felt were necessary. It was through these meetings at Paper Tiger that it became more and more clear to me that this was the fundamental value of public access, that is, a media built by citizens. No professional credentials were necessary; in fact, such credentials were viewed as getting in the way of their goals. The inadequacies of the mainstream media became more and more visible, as I learned about the citizens' points of frustration when it came to the mass media broadcasts. First, there was the tendency to prioritize the eye-catching image over the topic or content. A second point of contention was the prioritization of the official interpretations of the powerful or the viewpoint of intellectuals rather than the perspective of the socially vulnerable. Third, there was a lack of thorough coverage of the debated issues, and a strong tendency to simplify things as black and white. And finally, they took issue with the stereotyping and caricaturizing of subject matter.

Dispelling the fog from the mass media

In 1993, the US was the only developed country in the world not to have health insurance for all its citizens. Private health insurance companies competed amongst each other in an open marketplace. For that reason, 38% of Americans at the time were not covered by any health insurance whatsoever. Although the Clinton administration took on the challenge of revamping the national health care system, when the amendments to the national health insurance system were finally announced, the insurance companies banded together in a campaign against the amendments in order to protect their interests.

Specifically, there were two suggested amendments, and it was around these two proposals that debate ensued. The first was the so-called 'managed competition' system, and the other was a 'single payer' system. The former protected the free market with some government oversight, while in the latter proposal, the government would administer health care and the entire nation would get equal access to basic medical services. Naturally, the health insurance industry backed 'managed competition.' They backed the system that was better for the industry, not better for the American public.

The private sector insurance industry spent nearly five and a half million dollars developing a clever commercial campaign.⁸ In it, a husband and wife read about the news of the national health insurance reform in the newspaper and express concern and disappointment over the reduction in choices available to them. The punch line for these ads was "If they choose, we lose." The negative image whipped up by the insurance industry portrayed the government initiative as effectively limiting people's options and built this message with great skill and intensity. Ironically, the phrase was also a perfect reflection of the position of the country's insurance industry.

The program that Paper Tiger Television produced in response to this ad campaign was called *Media Blocks Out on Healthcare Reform*, and was composed of two parts. Part one, entitled "Proposals for Universal Healthcare Reform," introduced members of citizen's groups concerned with health care issues who support the 'single payer' system, and the reasons why they supported the reform. Many of the interviewees

⁸ Known as the "Harry and Louise Campaign," this ad campaign was funded by the Health Insurance Association of America, a health insurance industry lobbying group. [tr]

were women, and especially, minority women, and the program made it clear that they were affiliated with organizations that support low-income groups. The voices of these normally subordinated and invisible women, who never appear in the mass media, appealed directly to their audience in an unadorned yet powerful style. Part two of the program, called “How the Mainstream Media Covers the Universal Healthcare Reform Issue,” was an analysis of how the mainstream media represented the issue. In collaboration with an NGO that had been seeking universal health care reform in the US for over ten years, Paper Tiger provided information about the health care systems adopted in other countries, allowing the public to consider what the ideal healthcare system would be. Such information was completely lacking in the mass media.

This NGO banded together with citizen groups closely involved with other health insurance issues, and with Paper Tiger’s advice, produced and aired a commercial with a message completely different from that of the corporate insurance groups. In their counter ad, a couple describes how effectively the ‘single-payer’ system would reduce wasteful tax spending and increase the number of people covered. Meanwhile, they also covered the way in which the mass media criticized the single-payer system such as, for example, the ABC network’s contention that the ‘data was inconclusive’ and CBS’s allegation that the [single-payer system] was at once “too broad and particular” a reform. Comparing ads from both sides of the issue, and armed with the information presented in Paper Tiger’s program, the viewers were given a chance to see just how off-target the mass media’s criticism of the single-payer system was and to understand just how unbalanced the media coverage itself was.

The show was produced in a studio provided for free by Manhattan’s public access television, Manhattan Neighborhood Network. Since all the workers were volunteers, there were no labor costs, making the total production cost just under \$50. The creative handmade touches such as the humorous hand-drawn backdrop gave all the Paper Tiger programs the distinctive feel of New York. Proof that lots of funding does not necessarily guarantee a good product, Paper Tiger embodied the notion of freedom from commercialism through its practice.

Mass media, therefore, is not almighty. As long as capital is what supports it, it will, of necessity, have its structural limits. And that is precisely why the work of community organizations like Paper Tiger are so important, for they perform the role of filling in the holes and evening out the imbalances. In the present chaotic media landscape, the need for citizens to protect and ensure the public’s right to know and inform will only grow. In my work as part of the production staff, I was deeply struck by the group’s grassroots democratic stance that the public’s right to know had to be ensured by the public themselves. At the same time, I saw how necessary this was in not just media, but in many other aspects, and I came to understand the power of everyday people who are driven by a vision to make different kinds of programs. My work with Paper Tiger became a crucial experience through which I gained the vantage point of viewing different media relative to one another.

2. MAKING THE NHK SPECIAL PROGRAM: “CHILDREN FACING A WAR ZONE”

It was the Persian Gulf War that made Paper Tiger Television known to the world. In 1990, Paper Tiger brought together anti-war movements from all over the nation on its

airwaves. Although ultimately, the war was not averted, Paper Tiger's presence when the war began played an important role as a corrective to the pro-war bias that overwhelmed the American mass media of the time.⁹

But what happened after the Persian Gulf War? The American media portrayed an image of Iraq as 'evil' in all its coverage of the Persian Gulf issues, and the Japanese media dutifully followed the US lead. There seemed to be no media transmitting the feelings of the Iraqi people. The media's inability to step outside the given framework of America equals good, Iraq equals bad, was disturbing.

In 1997, through the invitation of a producer with whom I worked, I had the opportunity to listen to a lecture by a woman belonging to an NGO that helps Iraqi children. This woman, Ito Masako, had been single-handedly organizing the transfer of relief supplies to Iraq for the seven years since the end of the Persian Gulf War. According to her report, because of the effects of the depleted uranium munitions used by the coalition forces during the Gulf war, children were being born with deformities and high rates of leukemia. But because of continued economic sanctions since the beginning of the war, there were extreme shortages in medicines. If we include deaths caused by lack of medicine and malnutrition, over one million children are said to have died in the last seven years [of sanctions] alone. If we could make a film that shows how Iraqi children have lived in the years after the Persian Gulf War, it seemed possible to break through, if only a little, the stereotypes about Iraq in the mainstream media. And I thought it would be meaningful to broadcast it on NHK, a major mainstream network, for that would allow us to bring in something different into the mass media.

Roughly 40% of the programs that are broadcast on NHK are jointly produced with outside production companies. After a decision is reached about which programs will be handed over to external productions and how many co-produced shows there will be, calls for show ideas are publicly solicited. For a single program slot, therefore, there are times when almost 500 show ideas are submitted by external sources. These proposals are then evaluated by NHK affiliate groups such as NHK Enterprise and the selected proposals submitted to headquarters. Whether a given proposal comes to fruition depends on whether or not the NHK producer in charge actively pushes his recommendation. Other factors are also considered, such as the suitability of the content for the program slot, the value of the information for public broadcast, and the reputability of the production company.

The gist of the proposal that I submitted to the NHK network was as follows: "Eight years after the Persian Gulf War, how have postwar children been living under severe economic sanctions? And was this war, touted to have reduced the number of victims by using technologically accurate weapons, really a 'clean' war? This program tries to look at the underreported everyday life of Iraqi people, and treat it from the perspective of the weakest in society: the children." When I submitted the proposal, I strongly stressed that I would *not* refer to the long-standing political standoff between the US and Iraq.

My proposal was easily approved, with the help of two factors: first, the fact that the life of the everyday Iraqi had not been covered in the media, and second, the fact that the opportunity for such interviews was so rare, and would have been impossible, save

⁹ *Media riterashii wo manabu hito no tame ni*, p. 212.

for the arrangements of Ito Masako. The producer in charge was particularly supportive, saying that it was proposals such as these that were really worth doing. Rather than discuss the issues of right or wrong concerning the Persian Gulf War, this producer felt there was value in just showing the daily lives of Iraqi children. In November of 1998, Ito Masako and I entered Iraq with our camera crew.

The Iraq that the mass media did not cover

The children in the leukemia ward at Baghdad's largest hospital were in a dire situation; not only did they have no access to medicines for treatment of their leukemia, but they hardly had enough to eat. Over the nine years of continued economic sanctions, Iraqi society had been falling apart at the seams. Utterly powerless, the people of Iraq have had nothing to be hopeful about, except to cling to the singular hope for the economic sanctions to be lifted so that their lives could return to what they used to be. In this situation, there is no more tragic existence than that of the parent of a sick child. The U.S., with its vaunted democracy, has consistently justified the seemingly unfair imposition of inhumane economic sanctions by referring to Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. Yet if the weapons of mass destruction are truly the issue, why shouldn't all the countries that have the nuclear bomb be targeted? And what should be said of the massive amounts of chemical weapon used in the Persian Gulf War, or the one million children dead thanks to U.S. economic sanctions?

With lingering questions in my mind, on December 16, 1998, I returned to Baghdad from collecting materials at the Kuwaiti border, the former site of warfare during the Persian Gulf War. But things were not right around me. The NGO worker from Italy whom I had been planning to interview left the country in a panic. I then recalled that the following day was the very day I had proposed one month earlier when I contacted UN workers to secure interview appointments, and they had unanimously said "No." When I called one of the UN workers, I was told that he had long ago been evacuated from the country. Hailing a taxi in the silent streets of Baghdad, I went over to the Press Center, and was told that there was a possibility of bomb attacks. Then I knew intuitively that this had been planned for over a month. It was December 16th that day, and the Gulf War began on January 17th [1991]. When the date changes at midnight to the 17th, they might begin the bombing, the Iraqi translator warned me. At this point, however, there was no way of exiting the country.

That night, on December 17th, 1998, early in the morning of 12:30 am, the bombing began. Flashes of light and the sound of bomb blasts tore through the streets of Baghdad, as the bombs continued to explode. The hypocrisy of bombing in order to preserve peace became painfully clear to me as never before. While the NGO workers and the UN workers had the option of leaving the country, the Iraqi people had nowhere to escape.

I visited the home of a young girl with leukemia on the day following the air strikes. Everything was the same as before at the little girl's home. Life continues despite air strikes. Her mother's words, "I am so tired. We just want our quiet life back" left a stinging pain in my heart. At the hospital where I had been earlier, civilians wounded by the bombs were being brought in. From one family, a still nursing infant, a five-year-old girl, and their mother were all on the brink of death from their injuries. The conflict between the US government and Hussein were matters of an impossibly remote world for

the Iraqi people. Yet, the reality of warfare was closing in on them. It is always the weak that take the heaviest toll in war.

Bringing in an alternative viewpoint into the mass media

I stayed in Iraq for 40 days, and brought home a total of 80 tapes of 30-minute footage. What I consciously tried to do in the editing process was not to emphasize the desperate conditions of the Iraqi people, and to maintain objectivity. In covering any aspect of the Iraqi situation, especially the heart-wrenching scenes taking place in hospitals, there was the risk of falling into media stereotyping with one false step. For the majority of the world that watches media coverage characterizing Iraq as evil, such reporting could give the false impression that it was being used for pro-Hussein propaganda. In the end, the program we produced was a report on the everyday lives of Iraqi people, which avoided the emotional probing of international politics. I had hoped that the images of everyday life for the Iraqis inserted into NHK news sequences would naturally convey Iraq's deadlocked situation and the people's desperation.

At the NHK network, producers previewed both externally and internally made productions, in order to thoroughly check the program's quality, to see if it fit in with NHK's style, and to verify that the content was appropriate for public broadcast. The first preview of our program was screened only to the producers directly involved. At the end of the screening, the first comment was that the tone was entirely "too anti-American." Because it was argued that a visible anti-American bias would get in the way of my real intention being conveyed, I was directed to rewrite the narration. Although I had attempted to be as objective as I could, my strong feelings of sympathy with the Iraqi people and my anger towards the U.S. for commencing air strikes had evidently come out unconsciously in the narration.

For the second screening, the executive level producers were present. While the producers directly involved felt that the second version was significantly reduced in anti-American tone, the overseeing producers who saw it for the first time said that they "could not broadcast such an overtly anti-American program." My footage of Iraq showed the poverty in that country so vividly that any one who saw it would be unable to deny the inhumanity of the U.S. military in executing air strikes against such a country.

But reality is reality. The problem at hand was that NHK could not air something so contrary to U.S. public statements. This was a line that NHK, as a public mass media broadcaster, could not cross. What I feared the most was that the program would be shelved, so I was prepared to make some compromises to get it aired, as long as I could get across my most crucial message: the extent of the suffering experienced by the politically innocent Iraqi people and children with leukemia, and the inhumane reality of the sanctions.

Ultimately, the solution proposed by both groups of producers was to combine objective narration with my voice-over comments as director. By doing the presentation in such a way that made it clear that the comments did not reflect NHK's official views, but rather, were a direct report of what the director found on location, the program was cleared for broadcast.

The Japanese media is sorely lacking in diversity of viewpoints. It is only through the development of various ideas and angles, that the media can achieve some balance. But how do we actualize this kind of diversity in the media? For one, as film producers,

we can produce programs with an alternative viewpoint. Not everything has to be done from an alternative viewpoint, however. Even if the program deals with mainstream content, as long as a small message is put into the program, that is enough. Another point to consider is that the mainstream media will not air any and all alternative media content; inevitably, there are limits. But if one puts forth a well-supported proposal and negotiates persistently, getting aired in the mainstream media is not impossible. Although it is a large system, the mass media world accords a degree of discretion to the individual who is there, on location. Even within the mass media, there are people with alternative viewpoints, and in the present environment of diversification of channels, the possibilities are sure to grow. There are some producers who say that if they make ten programs, they want one of them to be a little different. Personally, I believe that the possibilities are out there.

3. ON THE POSSIBILITIES FOR PUBLIC ACCESS IN JAPAN

The 1990s was a period when the high quality documentary programs enjoyed in the 1980s were disappearing one after another, as television programming headed down the road of entertainment and variety shows. This had the effect of producing viewers who were dissatisfied with the depiction of conventional morals and popular entertainment. In this period of changing social values, television became unable to respond to the varied needs that people had. At the same time, with the diversification of channels through the entry of foreign capital and the rise of the internet, subscribers to cable television increased.

In the US during the latter half of the 1970s into the 1980s, a movement towards public access developed, allowing citizens to gain more access to the media. In Japan, however, where cable television was not so widespread, public access television like that of the US did not emerge even in the 1990s. But as public access became more well-known, things began to change.

The “People’s Media” Experiment

First, there was a wave of alternative media production in the 1990s, which was distributed through means other than the channels provided by cable television. For example, there was the “People’s Media” experiment. In 1992, a network of independent film producers and local activists in Japan was established through a meeting of the “People’s Media Network.” This organization was intended to bring people together through casual meetings, for the purpose of sharing and exchanging information. Instead of a media that “opposes mass media,” their central purpose was to return the media to the hands of the people. Members of this organization ranged from individuals were active in citizen’s movements, the average white collar worker, or people who worked freelance in the media business. The organization’s administrative structure was supported through the voluntary efforts of its members.

Tsuchiya Yutaka, who works under the group name *Without Television* [original in English], felt that video art had gotten trapped inside the artist and had become uninteresting. Asking whether video art could exist in a form that was more outward-looking, he used images as a means of communication in his video production. In 1995, Tsuchiya produced a film called *What do you think about the question of the emperor’s*

war responsibility? (Anata wa tenno no senso sekinin ni tuite do omoimasuka? (Shinjuku edition)). He distributed this film in video format, with the film being sold at the low price of 500 yen [about 5 USD] per videotape. A label on the packaging read: "This videotape is part of free access media. Everyone has the potential to make a statement through these images. Reproduce freely."

Not only did the film treat a topic that was taboo in the mainstream media, (namely, the issue of the emperor system in Japan) but the statement on its packaging clearly revealed the intention to do away with established media orthodoxies. Its method of distribution through the video form without relying on cable television also proved well suited to the contemporary media landscape of Japan. Video could be screened and discussed within gatherings of like-minded people. This use of video during the 1990s was a new phase of independent screenings, different from the 1970s and 80s.

In "People's Media," there is no need to imitate or follow the professional craft techniques of media production. It sends the message that anyone with a camera can express and convey a message. At the same time, by bringing together myriad grassroots citizen groups with video artists, it furthers the movement's goals through using images as a tool for citizen's movements.

There are other success stories from serendipitous use of methods similar to "People's Media." The series called *Very Ordinary People* ([title in English], dir. Shinomiya Tetsuo, 1995-2001) portrayed the steps towards independence taken by mentally disabled patients in the Hokkaido town of Urakawa. Local psychiatrists were forming a movement in which mentally handicapped patients were provided with opportunities to talk to each other and in so doing, begin to gain some independence in the community. An individual who took an interest in and sympathized with this movement sponsored volunteer staff to film the video footage. This video was initially provided free of charge, and later made available at cost to those who requested it. Quickly spreading through the country, it became *the* "talked about" video of the time. In the film, the mentally handicapped patients appeared using their real names, and spoke about their handicaps. With warmth and humor, the film showed how the patients interacted with people in the community who supported them as they worked toward making a life for themselves.

This modest example of an alternative media video was so well received that the mainstream news program *News 23* on TBS went to the local area and covered it live in a special broadcast. This health care movement eventually became a source of revitalization for the town itself. This thrilling instance of the mass media following in the footsteps of alternative media reveals the great promise that lies in the work of organizations such as "People's Media." It is evidence that the *type* of media is not an issue; as long as it covers content which the public seeks, the makers of these images should theoretically be able to move freely back and forth between mainstream and alternative medias.

I hope by now to have shown that the inheritors of alternative media, or so-called 'other media,' have shifted from being professional filmmakers to the average citizen. Unlike in the past, filmmaking can be done without expensive equipment and high technical skills. Nevertheless, professional films by professional filmmaking groups will no doubt continue to be made. And from within these groups, a filmmaker who brings to light social issues ignored in the mass media will be sure to emerge. Take, for example,

Mori Tatsuya, who tried to depict average Aum Cult¹⁰ believers as real people, but ended up having no choice but to leave his post at the TBS network. By completing his independent production entitled *A*, he was able to depict an Aum sect member as a young man struggling to find his way, instead of merely as an ‘evil’ individual, which was the mass media’s typical portrayal.¹¹

Tasks for a public access in Japan

Public access channels broadcasting alternative programs created by collectives like New York’s Paper Tiger also exist in Japan. In 1989, Chukai Cable Television Company based in Chukai in Tottori Prefecture established a channel devoted to public access, and has since been offering it to its citizens. But the biggest problem here has been “the lack of programs being brought in...even in the most active period, a program a week is about the most that gets brought in. So the programs go through rushed editing, or filming continues alongside the editing process. The quality therefore leaves much to be desired.”¹²

In the case of the US, the movement for public access brought about a transformation in the way media was viewed: from something made only by professionals, to something that could be made by ordinary citizens and broadcast on a public channel. But it was this transformation in how media was viewed that was crucial. Although one of the reasons that public access has not become widespread in Japan is because of infrastructure problems, another reason is the lack of belief among the public that it is one’s right as a citizen to make one’s voice heard through the media. In addition, the public access movement in the U.S. is supported by the existence of a solid citizen’s support base, but in Japan, such a support base is minimal.

This lack is deeply connected to the state of grassroots democracy, which must be the starting point of any public access media. So the task that Japanese public access must confront is two-sided: on the one hand, there is the issue of infrastructure, and on the other hand, there is the issue of public awareness. For example, American public access works together with cable television companies, not only in providing the hardware equipment, but also providing training on how to use the equipment. Through these routes, ordinary citizens can learn directly from experts in communication and media education. But in Japan, while opportunities for broadcasting their own programs are made available, training in media literacy is miniscule. Becoming media literate so that people may look critically at the media is fundamental to the production of public access programs, but unfortunately, this is absent in Japan. For a public that has never been educated to look critically at the media, giving them the equipment and the opportunity for producing programs is not enough; there must be a real understanding of the significance of public access as well as the ability to seek out suitable topics.

Yet, through the involvement of citizens who take cameras into their own hands, a new brand of alternative media is being born. In 2000 in the cities of Mitaka and Musashino, the Musashino Mitaka Cable Television established a public access channel.

¹⁰ The Aum Shinrikyo Sect was a religious sect made most famous for its responsibility in the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system in March of 1995. [tr]

¹¹ Mori Tatsuya, “A” *satsuei nisshi – oumu shisetsu de sugoshita 13 kagetsu* (Gendai Shokan, 2000).

¹² Tsuda Masao, Hiratsuka Chihiro ed. *Paburikku akusesu: shimin ga tsukuru media*. (Riberaru Shuppan, 1998).

When calls for participants in this Musashino Mitaka Citizen's Network went out, over 100 applicants of various ages responded, ranging from students, white collar workers, housewives, and retired persons. The person who became the head of the preparatory committee was a man who had been involved for over ten years in volunteer activities with the disabled community and had some experience making programs during his years working for his company. The preparatory committee began making its plans in July of 2000, and by January 1st of 2001, aired its first program entitled, *Our Town*, (Watashitachi no machi, 2001) an hour-long program. Housewives and company workers with no professional experience took part in the producing the program, driven by their own motivations and feelings. Introducing a store in the local Kichijōji area and portraying the feelings of the people who maintain the local Inokashira Park, they filmed nature as it came to life in their locale. Since then, programs have continued to be made at the rate of about one a month. There have been programs such as *The Children next door* (Tonari no kodomo tachi) produced by young mothers, *A day in the life of a City Council Member* (Shigi kaigiin'tte donna hito?) and *Getting familiar with parliament* (Gikai o mijika ni), which asks fundamental civics questions of its audience. With the 300,000 yen (about 3,000 USD) in support that they receive from the Musashino Mitaka Cable television, they pay the office rent and production costs, while all the rest is done with volunteer labor.

After one year, the number of members has increased to 60, with about 30 of them active regularly. Mizuno Hiroyuki, who has been de facto leader of the group since they opened a prep room, says that while the sharing of information amongst members is the most crucial task, members can also learn how to work the camera and editing equipment, and learn the skills of how to put together a program. Furthermore, members learn about their own community by way of making these programs. After one year, a handbook was issued for members. The charter contained in it states the group's goal of supporting and performing projects in community building, which will make life in the town more livable and animated, as well as its stated aims "to learn about, tell others about, and reflect on our town," "to understand, meet, and share with people," and "to support citizen's exchange of information and the expression of their opinions." The language of this charter came directly from the members themselves. The last statement, in particular, regarding the goal "to support citizen's exchange of information and the expression of their thoughts" reflects the wish to have ordinary citizens bring in their own programs. Mizuno is hopeful that the people who have come together in order to make their own television programs will build upon their experiences and ultimately, help raise issues which confront the larger community. The citizens have in public access a space in which to experiment through trial and error process. A Japanese form of public access has the potential to grow from this kind of place.

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