

using video to resolve community conflict

Gerri Gay

In the summer of 1979, an exploratory study was conducted in Maine that used small-gauge video as an intervention tool in a herbicide spraying conflict. Video was used to promote dialogue between citizens protesting the use of aerial spray and the blueberry growers and industry using the spray. Not only did video serve to document the environmental problem, but it enabled both parties to see themselves as well as the other side without direct threat or antagonism.

Background

The stage for violent conflict was set in the blueberry barrens of Maine in the summer of 1979. For nearly 50 years, Maine's blueberry growers have been spraying and dusting with strong chemical pesticides to control the blueberry fruit fly. The growers claimed it was necessary for them to spray to comply with federal regulations and consumer demands. The protesting group countered that long-term effects of persistent pesticide use were questionable, and claimed that water supplies and the general health of communities adjacent to spraying operations were endangered.

The conflict between the protesters and the blueberry growers led to arrests, violence, and economic damage to the industry. Direct confrontation and mediation efforts only seemed to accelerate the already intense situation. Neither side seemed willing to listen to the other's point of view through traditional communication channels.

An alternate channel was needed to help facilitate communication. Video was introduced to the participants in the conflict as a mediation tool through which each side could send its messages to the opposite side. Using video as an equalizer helped both groups communicate in a non-threatening, non-hostile environment.

Gerri Gay: Associate Director, Video Communication Laboratory and Research Specialist, Department of Communication Arts, Cornell University—Ithaca, New York. Accepted for publication: November, 1981.

Conducting the Project

Phase I: Entry and Pretests

The video facilitator from Cornell University contacted key leaders involved in the herbicide conflict in Maine. Pretests were administered to determine the participants' present attitudes toward the environmental conflict and toward video technology. Video training sessions and contract agreements were conducted before any video production. It was necessary to gain the trust of participants and assure them that any video segments they didn't want shown to the opposing side would be destroyed.

Phase II: Training, Production, Selection

After the participants learned to script and operate the video equipment, each group produced its own tapes, describing the conflict as they envisioned it and outlining possible solutions to the dispute. The tapes were then viewed and analyzed. Facilitators helped participants in each group select segments to be shown to the other side.

Phase III: Showings and Feedback

The first productions were shown to the opposing parties by the facilitator. Reactions to the tapes were then videotaped, and selected portions of the reactions were shown to the opposing parties.

Phase IV: Analysis

Posttests were administered to determine what changes, if any, occurred in the thinking of the participants. Results were systematically analyzed by the facilitator and participants.

Results

When the opposing parties learned to handle the new communication technology, they could express their concerns in a way that helped them understand the effects of their behavior on other people and the environment.

Initially, the growers wanted to use the videotapes to balance the score with the protesters and restore the status quo. They felt the protesters were "attacking the wrong people (the growers)." One grower said, "If protesters want change, they should be talking with legislators, government agencies, and the people in power. We are essentially helpless and can't make rapid changes by ourselves."

Video was a valuable tool for producing evidence to the opposing sides when actual physical conditions or situations weren't understood. Video also enabled the opposing parties to listen to each other without the direct threat of confrontation or violence. Since the participants selected the segments to be shown to the other side, there was no danger of exploitation and less chance of misinterpretation.

Small-gauge video provides the opportunity for people to have equal access to, and control over, a communication

channel. Participants were able to focus on a constructive solution to the conflict rather than trying to shape "media events" to voice their viewpoints. One member of the protest group stated during the video evaluation that he felt that "video equalized power in the conflict."

The parties involved not only produced messages from their own perspectives, but interpreted their own messages, as well as the messages produced by the opposing side. By being able to express feelings on the issue, and analyze these messages, the groups eventually began to work together to reach a constructive solution to the problem, based on the facts and with less emphasis on emotion.

Video is a means for helping groups communicate with one another, whether the difficulties arise from defensiveness, hostility, or other inhibiting factors. . . .

Implications for Extension

Conflict often results when there's a breakdown in communication. When attempts to communicate face-to-face are met with frustration, and even threats of physical violence, some means must be found to ease the tension and hostility. The New York State Cooperative Extension Administration recently released a statement concerning Extension's role in controversial issues:

Extension cannot avoid dealing with issues which result in different outlooks, attitudes and perspectives as viewed by Extension clientele. Research and the knowledge of faculty will both increase the intensity of debate on some controversial issues and suggest solutions to others. Extension should help people learn and understand the facts involved in issues. Process skills (in decision-making processes and in communication) should be a program priority, as well as more tangible technology; human process skills are crucial to people coping with issues.¹

Video is a means for helping groups communicate with one another, whether the difficulties arise from defensiveness, hostility, or other inhibiting factors. Video can be used to record an individual's thoughts on an issue, can be played back to the person for accuracy, and then shown to those on the other side of the controversy. The process is unique because it requires people be responsible for solving their own problems. The Extension agents or staff are facilitators, not participants, in the process. Once people begin to speak freely of their concerns in a face-to-face situation, video is no longer needed.

Video can also be used to document physical conditions requiring change. It's a valuable tool for providing evidence to the opposing sides, when they may not understand the actual conditions or environmental concerns. Use of video isn't to be viewed as a "recipe" for conflict intervention, since different communities (and different conflicts) would require different approaches and techniques. And, no one should use video without first analyzing why and when to use it, and its cost effectiveness in a particular situation.

- Footnote** 1. Bettie Lee Yerka and Carl R. Pearce, "Extension's Role in Controversial Issues" (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Cooperative Extension Administration, 1981).

coming

- ▶ how agents and clients view programs
 - ▶ can mass media change behavior?
 - ▶ recruiting 4-H leaders: what tips the scale?
 - ▶ publications have an impact
-