

VIDEOFILE

PAPER TIGER TELEVISION

KATHLEEN HULSER

**THE NEW
YORK
PUBLIC
ACCESS
SHOW THAT
BITES BACK.**

Crayoned on brown wrapping paper that jerks across the screen are the words: "It's 8:30. Do you know where your brains are?" It's time for "Paper Tiger Television," a venture in public access cable whose funky, handmade look is a comment on the communications industry that is its subject. A mostly live, mostly made-in-New York show, "Paper Tiger" tackles the media industry from a radical perspective. On each half-hour segment—and the last four years have seen more than sixty produced—a commentator dissects a publication or an aspect of the media, giving a reading that combines a review and an exposé, thinking out loud and playing around.

Poking fun at television conventions, "Paper Tiger" nevertheless pays tribute to the power of the medium. As a media project, the show has a serious aim: to make people think about the underpinnings of the information industry. At the same time, as a player in the "info-tainment" game, "Paper Tiger" adopts an ironic, playful style which assures that it, too, can draw on the persuasiveness of the tube. And all on a \$10,000-a-year budget.

"Paper Tiger" cuts to the heart of the television aesthetic by virtue of its frequently live-transmission, blab-based format, and—most of all—its "host/commentator" poised on a yellow wooden chair eyeballing the camera in what is often a memorable exercise in direct address. The essay format depends on the commentator's knowledge and personal flair, but its watchability ultimately derives from the simple use of insouciant graphics in pri-



Joan Braderman chews up the National Enquirer.

mary colors, hand-painted backdrops, in-frame skits and improvisations, sly snatches of pop music, and imaginative cutaways rolling underneath the standard central fact-sheet section. The wedding of the personal essay with some features of broadcast television has charmed cable viewers from San Diego to Madison to Buffalo, and individual segments are increasingly cropping up in classrooms and art galleries from Bologna, Italy, to Washington, D.C.

The show began as a miniseries within "Communications Update," a weekly public access program that encouraged Manhattan's downtown media artists to comment on communications issues and to create new work for the new medium. The first six "Paper Tigers," shot in 1981, featured media critic Herb Schiller paging through ten pounds of the Sunday *New York Times*. Author of *Who Knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 500*, Schiller proved to be a walking, talking

fact file capable of a rousing, intellectual performance.

Producer DeeDee Halleck, finding herself buried under the demands of assembling more shows on a regular basis, began recruiting help. The "Paper Tiger" collective began to evolve.

Mao called the United States a "paper tiger" and the show's producers elaborated on the theme, saying, "The power of mass culture rests on the trust of the public. This legitimacy is a paper tiger." In one audience outreach effort, the producers stepped in the tiger's cage by leafletting *New York Times* employees at shift changes to notify them of the show's schedule. Halleck considers the thousands of Yuppies and office workers who staff Manhattan's information industry a substantial potential audience.

If attacking media tigers has a tonic effect for audiences, producing a "Paper Tiger" is "often good for a heart attack," according to collective member Diana Agosta. Usually one member of the eight-to-fifteen-person collective teams up with

a commentator to make a specific show. The commentators—frequently academics or writers concerned with media issues—are drawn from the research pool of the collective. Producer and commentator research a publication, network, or issue together, drawing information from advertising brochures, corporate reports, *Wall Street Journal* articles, and so on. Then at a collective meeting, members toss around visual ideas to express or complement the theme. Generally, the fact-sheet section is shot in advance with profit figures, corporate policies, or other economically revealing tidbits of the organization's structure printed over location footage.

The incipient coronary begins an hour before air time as the live show's crew meets in a coffee shop on Twenty-third Street below the studio, where the imponderables of the various voluntary contributions begin to come together. Did Daniel Brooks, audio artist and first-class mixer, find time to assemble a pop tune or two and

Paper Tiger Television

"PAPER TIGER" HAS A PAW IN THE ART WORLD AND HAS SET UP INSTALLATIONS IN NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON.

some sound effects? Has someone hauled down the yellow kitchen chair from Dee-Dee's Upper West Side apartment? Has Mary Feaster—collective member, performance artist, and bass player in an all-woman reggae band—combed her closet for a fedora and cat's-eye glasses to wear in the skit?

As the pieces fall into place, everybody watches the clock. Halleck candidly notes that with a half hour to set up, test mikes, cue pre-edited tape sequences, sort hand-lettered graphics cards, and scrawl the credits on the homemade "cranky" scroll, there's no time to lament inadequate rehearsals, no-shows, or prop shortfalls. The camera pans "8:30" in a tongue-in-cheek tribute to news urgency, and the floor manager waves to the commentator: "You're on."

From its first exclusively live segments, "Paper Tiger" has evolved into a bouncy mix of live and edited elements. In "Privacy," communications activist Nolan Bowie illustrates the limitations of the talking format by reading directly from newspaper articles without raising his head. But this exercise in info-tedium is surrounded by devices that compensate for the dry lecture. Every few minutes "secret file" information, profiling members of the "Paper Tiger" collective, rolls across the screen, accompanied by fuzzy police-style videotapes of the subjects. Member C "buys red pants" and "is hard to detect in crowds"; Member K "is a poor credit risk"

and "never liked *National Geographic*." Meanwhile, a black-and-white surveillance camera silently pivots above Bowie's head and a "bystander" observes him with binoculars.

"Joan Braderman Reads the *National Enquirer*" is an example of a "Paper Tiger" minigenre that transcends predictable critique by drawing on psychosocial analysis. Hip to the lure of trash and candid about the shame of being caught in the act of reading it, Braderman views the *Enquirer* with a mix of attraction and repulsion that explains the appeal of lurid pulp formulas. Similarly, a show on Gothic paperbackbacks manages to refrain from snobbish laughter at the stock plots by illuminating the thwarted romantic ambitions of their mass female audience.

In the past year, "Paper Tiger" has featured more issue-oriented segments. For example, "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do" uses skits and audio high jinks to bring home the impact of the AT&T divestiture. Sketching the history of public-utility regulation, commentator Peter Hall explains what consumers can expect now that giant Ma Bell has been chopped up into regional pieces. Melissa Leo, a "Paper Tiger" troupe regular, plays a frenzied switchboard operator trying to answer the unanswerable: A customer wants to know how buying a telephone will affect his bills. An audio collage of prerecorded messages referring the caller to other prerecorded messages conveys consumers' confusion.

A "Paper Tiger" tendency that will probably expand as the collective incorporates more minority producers is the examination of racial and cultural stereotypes. A case in point is a reading on Asian-American images by Renee Tajima. Ambivalent about just talking on camera, Tajima opens her commentary by saying, "I'll interview myself," since no one else is present to do it. The first question—"Where do

stereotypes come from?"—is answered partially through the studio setup she and producer Shu Lea Cheang have devised. As Tajima talks about the images of Asians in America, a girl in the background makes herself up into an "Oriental." Meanwhile, we see the camera closing in on the scene in a mirror, struggling for focus and clarity. When Tajima muses that on-screen Asian women fall into two categories—the lotusblossom baby and the dragon lady—it's a prelude to mail-order-bride images and clips from *Teahouse of the August Moon*.

Since the collective hopes that its work will be taken as a model for making cheap, relevant cable shows, they welcome contributions from independent access producers across the country. So far, segments have been staged in Madison, Wisconsin; Washington, D.C.; Rochester, New York; and San Diego, California. A segment on the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* incorporates material shot in Managua.

The California show illustrates the amusing and oft-noted difference between East and West Coast sensibilities. A razzle-dazzle countdown to air time with video graphics chasing the "classic sweeping second hand" opens "Paper Tiger West." Host Eric Mankin reads the *Los Angeles Times* while strolling along the sun-drenched Venice boardwalk. Passers-by grab favorite sections of the paper as Mankin juggles the bulky mass and delivers his deadpan commentary to the camera, seemingly oblivious of his surroundings. To heighten the almost ludicrous dominance of life-style concerns, cutaways swing from a roller-skating *Times* reader to body builders to a one-man band in a World War I flying helmet. Although the program remains within the "Tiger" format, the rendering is strictly "California."

Lately, "Paper Tiger" has begun branching out from its study of American mass culture. In one recent segment, Gabor Rittersporn, who edits the Marxist journal *Telos*, is ensconced in a stuffy, cluttered Manhattan apartment, examining *Pravda* and explaining what is explicit and what is left unsaid, while Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* plays on television in the background. Summing up one of *Pravda*'s primary functions, Rittersporn observes that it helps bureaucrats learn to handle the delicate relations of society and state while also acting as a tip sheet on when they might lose their posts.

Even as "Paper Tiger" is beginning to attract national attention, its producers are thinking globally. Collective member Martha Wallner says, "We want and need to do more by and about the Third World and the New Order of Information." Her vision of the future entails making shows with journalists and activists from other countries who can cite neglected and misre-



The "Paper Tiger" crew helps Herb Schiller read the New York Times.

DeeDee Halleck

ported issues. And such positive informational programs would balance the more cynical "Paper Tiger" segments that dwell on the faults of the U.S. mass media. She's already put some of these ideas into action through a cable project called "Exchange TV," which airs tapes from Central America on Manhattan Cable.

In addition to thinking internationally, Hilery Kipnis, the enthusiastic media activist in charge of distribution, has been disseminating teaching packages of tapes, transcripts, and fact sheets to university courses in communications and journalism. Next on the agenda is a satellite-distribution project utilizing cheap off-hour transmission time.

"Paper Tiger" also has a paw in the art world and has set up installations in galleries in New York and Washington. During an art exposition last spring in Bologna, "Paper Tiger" and other public access tapes attracted the attention of Europeans wondering what cable might offer public users. Also in the works is a "Paper Tiger" book to be produced by Real Comet Press, containing everything from production stories to show transcripts to punky visual marginalia.

Since its 1981 debut, "Paper Tiger" has demonstrated how public access series can stimulate substantial programming, drawing on the talents of a broad range of social thinkers new to the video medium. With its winning combination of diverse expertise, irreverent analysis, light-handed history, and speedy, low-budget production, "Paper Tiger" is truly a model of how to use electronic free speech. However, over the last five years, the cable industry itself has developed in ways that may threaten the expansion and even the survival of such initiatives. The federal Cable Communications Policy Act, passed last year, allows cable system owners to modify franchise public access requirements if it's shown that these restrictions are commercially unviable. Plagued with massive construction debts for building their systems, cable operators may be tempted to ax public access as the first dispensable expense now that the federal law releases them from strict observance of franchise agreements. But what may seem dispensable viewed from the ledger sheet looks essential from the standpoint of free speech in an electronic era—as "Paper Tiger" shows every Wednesday night.

Kathleen Hulser writes on independent media and alternative culture.

More information about the scrapbook, cassettes, and other materials is available by writing to "Paper Tiger," 165 West 91st St., Apt. 14-F, New York, N.Y. 10024.

Collector's Choice

A FISTFUL OF EASTWOOD

TEN TAPES TO MAKE YOUR DAY.

DAVE KEHR



Clint Eastwood hurtles down the highway with Sonda Locke in *The Gauntlet*.

It isn't just that Clint Eastwood is the last movie star—it's that he knows it and it makes him nervous. Since Eastwood first rode onto the screen in *A Fistful of Dollars*—that flat, strangely ciliated hat perched over his monumental forehead, those eyes squinting against the sting of the sun—he has enjoyed two decades of continuous popularity, a record unmatched since the days of the studio-launched, studio-guided stars.

The continuity of Eastwood's career (unlike a Redford or a Hoffman, he makes at least one and often two films a year) has allowed him to build up a substantial iconographic presence: More than an actor, Clint Eastwood is a unit of meaning. He brings with him his own set of themes, his own style of expression, and his own patterns of action. Careful in his choice of projects and deeply involved in their execution, Eastwood has done for himself what the old studio heads once did for their stars: He has fashioned a mythic image, drawing on elements both personal (the distinctive voice, glance, stride) and cultural (the American legends of the West, of individualism versus the law) to create the best-

defined, most resonant screen persona in contemporary American cinema.

And yet, from the moment Eastwood began to direct his own films (with *Play Misty for Me* in 1971), his work has expressed a discomfort with the notion of stardom—with his own screen personality in particular, and with the institution as a perverse and potentially dangerous cultural phenomenon in general. As a filmmaker, Eastwood has been placed with the action directors of the classical, genre-based Hollywood—with Walsh, Hawks, Ford, and Siegel. But Eastwood's work has an inner-directness, a self-consciousness, that doesn't really have much to do with that tradition. It seems more fruitful to place him with the actor-directors—with Charles Chaplin, Orson Welles, Jerry Lewis—whose ultimate subjects are themselves. Andrew Sarris once wrote of Chaplin that "his other self on the screen has always been the supreme object of contemplation." The same is true of Eastwood, but for him it is less a question of Chaplin's narcissism, Welles's masochism, or Lewis's schizophrenic self-analysis than of a curious kind of self-denial—a determination to