

VIDEO FACILITY : FEASIBILITY STUDY CRITERIA

Tasks of a feasibility study into a central London video facilities enterprise, for use in community access and by the 'independent' sector

A meeting at County Hall on 16 March 1984 was called by the Department of Industry and Employment to collect views from representatives of other GLC departments and from independent video groups funded by Arts & Recreation, on an application made by Hampden Gurney Studios Limited for investment/mortgage financing from GLEB. Hampden Gurney were seeking this investment for a television production facility they intended to open near Marble Arch for use by commercial television producers, with possible use of minority 'downtime' for community access.

The meeting's informal conclusion was to urge instead an investigation into the possibility of establishing a non-profit distributing video production facility for use in community access and by the 'independent' sector.

This note sets down preliminarily what a feasibility study exploring the establishment of such a facility should look into.

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Facilities

There is a 'prima facie' demand for more video edit suites in the community/independent sector. But what level of demand, now and projected? And therefore, how many suites? What technical formats? What proportion 2-monitor and 3-monitor? What accessories (caption generation, graphic effects, etc.)?

There is also a manifest demand for a studio facility. But of what spatial dimensions? Should this be of broadcast standard? (Probably). And if so, what arrangements for compatibility with the edit equipment? How many cameras? What lighting rig? What sophistication of audio equipment? Dressing rooms? Special access arrangements for large props and scenic decor?

An equipment pool for hire on productions is another proven demand. But exactly what items/sets of items? How many of each? Maintenance needs?

Obviously, attempted quantification of the levels of demand, and the financial viability of provision of facilities to meet them, is intimately connected with settling the principles and real levels for a sliding rate scale charged for their use. So investigation into rate-scales is fundamental. How would rate levels affect take-up? What proportion of business at each of the rates is necessary to ensure viability?

Additional equipment facilities have been mooted, and the economics of their provision needs to be investigated, although this may well confirm their exclusion. Namely, facilities for:

- duplication of short runs (50-500 copies)
- standards conversion to NTSC American standard
- telecine transfer (including super-8)
- outside broadcast unit

Allied operations

Would such a centre run other operations besides the provision of the above facilities? Possibilities for investigation:

- a distribution operation : to service and promote the non-transmitted use of independent, community, experimental and educational videotape material. Aimed solely at group and institutional use, or at individual domestic use as well? Selective library (TOC- and CoW-style), or open deposit (London Film-Makers' Co-op style)? With or without a 'shop-front' facility?
- a sales agency : to run an operation for programme sales to broadcast and cable TV outfits. Domestic, or overseas, or both?

- an exhibition operation? If so, in the form of a videotheque (pay-to-view booths for individual use), or in 'cinema' form (a small auditorium for collective viewing)? If the latter, presentations on mounted video-monitors, or by video-projection? With the emphasis on daytime preview use, or organised public showings?
- a production unit : equipment and experienced personnel to assist community groups in preparing, shooting and completing video-tapes expressing their viewpoint. What number and kinds of skilled personnel? What rate-scales? Separate equipment needed for such a unit, or hiring from the hire pool?
- training. Is this an appropriate centre for the provision of training? If so, 'recreational' or 'community', or junior trainees on full-time staff, or professional-level courses for technicians retraining from film to video? If the latter, what relation to NSCJTS? Could the previously mentioned crew and equipment of a production unit double for training?

Premises

Depending on what facilities are to be provided, what dimensions of premises are required, not only in absolute floor space, but in what sub-divisions? (N.B. extra height required for studio space).

What siting? Strong representations have been made that a West End location is the most appropriate. What benefits would this bring in use and income level, to offset the likely higher costs in borough rates and premises costs?

Purchase, or leasehold acquisition? How can GLC/GLEB assist in acquisition: provision of already owned premises? Guarantee for mortgage? Refurbishing a property purchased by a pension fund? Could a video centre go into the Trocadero?

Staffing and Management

Investigation required of :

- management structures
- relations between operations
- forms of accountability
- how to safeguard the social-cultural role
- staffing levels and costs, depending on range of activities
- hours of opening
- terms of employment
- union requirements

Financing

The feasibility study must investigate both initial capitalisation and projected on-going viability.

Viability of a project of this kind may not be a matter of investigating projected use and income facility-by-facility to test individual viability. It may be the potential combinations from within a range of reasonably-priced facilities and services that attracts users. Possible permutations of cross-subsidy between different operations and facilities need to be investigated, because provision of a particular 'non-viable' facility may enhance overall viability. Alternatively, financial assistance to a non-viable facility through subsidy across from another operation may be thought desirable on cultural grounds.

What sources and form of capital investment? Terms of repayment? What contribution can GLEB make in this regard? Are non-repayable capital grants available from any cultural agencies for parts of this project? Would Channel 4 Independent Film Commissioning department be interested in contribution on some terms to the provision of broadcast standard facilities for this kind of intended use?