

Kenneth Rogers

# LA Freewaves' Too Much Freedom?

## Alternative Video and Internet Distribution

After years of anticipation about what the future of Internet video might look like, a recent flurry of developments signals that it is time to turn away from this speculative conversation to assess the material present. The explosive growth of YouTube and its recent acquisition by Google, live webcam sites like Stickcam, the new peer-to-peer freeware and distribution protocol BitTorrent, DivX and other video compression formats, and portable media players that support video, like the latest generation iPod, have all contributed to the exponential rise of video blogging, v-casting (video podcasting), and YouTubing. These conjoined developments have contributed to a new logic of video distribution that has become increasingly decentralized and end-user driven, that is, not mediated by a centralized point of transmission but rather through a collective, constantly shifting relay of video streams that make up the Internet videosphere—a pulsing latticework halfway between the database and the proverbial McLuhanite *TV Guide* as thick as phonebook (or perhaps thicker as recent estimates put YouTube viewership at around 100,000,000 clips per day).<sup>1</sup> And yet, it is important to temper the utopian rhetoric of democratization, as it would be hasty to proclaim the v-cast or the video blog the Brechtian killer app that will transform the apparatus from one-way dissemination to two-way communication.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the present configuration is a hybrid of a centralized and privatized broadcast system, a quasi-democratic

public sphere, a searchable database, and a decentralized, do-it-yourself tactical network atomized into a variety of access points and interfaces that both circumvents but also depends upon the broadcast paradigm.

The fact that Internet video has, in a certain sense, arrived makes it a pivotal moment rethink the issue of access as it relates to traditions of video practice that have historically laid outside of the domain of commercial television. In this essay, I will examine the changing condition of access and Internet video distribution through a close analysis of the recent restructuring of the LA Freewaves festival. Held biennially since 1989, LA Freewaves has been the largest theatrical exhibition of alternative video in the greater Los Angeles area. However, for its most recent festival in November 2006, *Too Much Freedom?*, Freewaves made a sweeping transition to Internet distribution, scaling back its usual thirty or forty slated theatrical programs to a mere four, and transferring most of the festival to programs available exclusively online. This marked a significant organizational shift for the non-profit and put it to the forefront of Internet distribution experiments for alternative video. Freewaves' 2006 festival is an important case study of what is at stake for Internet video's future, not only because it is a pioneering example of its kind, but also because it has roots in a more extensive history of alternative video access and distribution, making the festival an important transitional object from earlier distribution experiments.

In order to develop a close reading of Freewaves' transition to the Internet that reveals what is more generally at stake for the future of alternative video online, it is important to contextualize the Freewaves festival within a deeper history of the two major forms of alternative video distribution: public access television and the museum and gallery system. Building from these two historical precedents, a close reading of Freewaves' web interface might help diagnose a broader shift in the changing communities, distribution paradigms, and conditions of spectatorship that are a consequence of the rise of Internet video. Within this framework, this essay will address the reconfigured parameters of the self-contained video text when situated within a culture of the clip, a new understanding of viewer interactivity in the era of the blog and the v-cast, the changing dynamics of audience response when online, and the decline of the curatorial statement when subordinated to a searchable database of titles and artists. Finally, I will examine the effect of the 2006 festival upon the alternative video community by addressing the way in which Freewaves' quest for a wider and more dispersed viewership may have simultaneously sacrificed local specificity and community building in the already deracinated geography of Los Angeles.

One of the critical points to be taken from the Freewaves example is that access in the sphere of alternative video is undergoing an important transition away from the mode of production and toward the mode of distribution. At a moment when a new user-based paradigm of exchange is organically emerging within the Internet videosphere, a shift from the historical emphasis on access as production to access as distribution is becoming a crucial way of understanding what is at stake for a contemporary alternative video movement. The confluence of technological innovation, new forms of social networking, and a changing video vernacular have together begun to significantly reshape the many forms of alternative video practice around a new logic of distribution. The exponentially expanding potential for alternative video to circulate online has pushed the issue to the fore of critical debate and begun to reshape alternative video practice around the distribution process. The turn from production to distribution

is starting to define the way in which alternative and experimental media is working through the question of access. As it is rapidly becoming the arena in which various kinds of social, political, and economic struggles are being played out, I will cautiously maintain that distribution has become a crucial realm for video's subversive and alternative potential vis-à-vis mainstream culture.<sup>3</sup>

## Freewaves Between Public Access and Video Art

The word access as it applies to alternative forms of video (such as guerilla television, video activism, and video art) has historically meant access to the means of production. Since the rise of early video collectives like Videofreex, the Raindance Corporation, Global Village, TVTV, and the People's Video Theater, alternative video practice has been based largely on the pluralistic ideal of bypassing capitalized institutional systems and placing the control of cultural production directly in the hands of individuals.<sup>4</sup> Even though the emphasis on production has never excluded distribution (and in rare instances tapes were telecast), the concern with how alternative video actually circulates within the social body has been, with a few notable exceptions, secondary to the production process itself. In part, this relates to a prominent ideal that access should be aligned with First Amendment rights and the democratic project of fostering individualized expression and free speech in the enlightened public sphere, an ideal more facily affixed to the production process as it readily avails itself to become content. But this emphasis on production also relates to more concrete technological matters, namely, the fact that affordable consumer video technology has been geared almost exclusively to the production end. Through the years, the untempered optimism of video collectives, video artists, and video activists regarding innovations like as the Portapak, the time-base corrector, the video camcorder, and Final Cut Pro has often been expressed as the promise that new technology will deliver democratized access to the means of production for the individual user.<sup>5</sup>

But even within this production-centric model of access, distribution nevertheless maintained an essential backstage presence within developing forms of alternative video. Early portable video

## LA FREEWAVES' TOO MUCH FREEDOM?

technology emerged more or less concurrently with the establishment of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967 and the subsequent displacement of National Educational Television with the Public Broadcasting Service in 1970.<sup>6</sup> It was thus a model of public distribution that provided not only the technological infrastructure but also the institutional framework for early video culture; from the very beginning public television affiliates played an integral role in promoting early video experimentation. A few dominant affiliates inaugurated programs that provided support for experimental projects; the WNET TV Lab, the KQED National Center for Experiments in Television, and the WGBH New Television Workshop were all established between 1967 and 1974 when funding from the NEA and the Rockefeller Foundation was abundant.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that distribution was not truly democratized in any institutional or technological sense and only handful of programs actually saw airtime on PBS, the historical impulse toward democratized distribution was a powerful ideal that shaped much of the content of the period in one-time broadcasts like the celebrated *The Medium is the Medium* (1969) and *Global Groove* (1973).<sup>8</sup> These maiden programs provided a kind of early culture of public access and made alternative video production inextricable from a socially progressive model of television distribution; yet one might argue that the model followed the form of representative democracy, in which privileged individuals stand in proxy for the entire social body.<sup>9</sup>

As the culture wars of the 1980s ignited, funding cutbacks and program scrutiny began to reduce both production support and the already paltry broadcast opportunities on PBS affiliates. Experimental video-makers seeking to access wider audiences viewed public broadcasting with increasing pessimism. This more or less coincided with the rise of major corporate cable providers that were mandated by the Federal Communications Commission in the late 1970s to give local municipalities access to their growing communications networks because so much of that new infrastructure encroached on the public domain. Public access cable was often viewed as a substitute for the diminished role of public broadcast that also aligned with the goal of finding

sustainable alternative forms of distribution in a space adjacent to the ever-expanding stream of commercial media. A number of video artists and activists in different geographical regions of the U.S. began to build cable access programming around the democratic ethics of involving local communities, empowering disenfranchised groups, representing marginalized and alternative points of view, providing a venue for minority and dissenting voices, and promoting a forum for open communication in the public sphere. One of the appeals of cable access when contrasted with the PBS affiliate system was that it delivered, in theory, the promise of direct democracy—democracy without proxy or mediation. Cable access, for better or worse, was marked by the ideal that every individual could have direct control of the means of distribution.<sup>10</sup>

From its inception, Freewaves' mission has always extended out of many of the same democratic distribution principles foundational to the cable access movement, but the organization has taken an alternate route to their implementation. Alongside its more conventional programming in established LA-area venues such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Geffen Contemporary, the Redcat Theater, the Egyptian Theater, and the American Film Institute, the festival is known for featuring creative experiments in distribution such as "road shows" (traveling video exhibitions that run programs in unconventional venues), video bus tours, video projects in youth and community centers, video billboards above the saturated commercial strips of Sunset and Wilshire Boulevards, and still other projects linked to vernacular video cultures like karaoke clubs. Similarly, the festival expressed its commitment to cross-cultural programming and public dialogue by developing a project that offered the free distribution of festival tapes to scores of public libraries and high schools in the greater Los Angeles area. Coinciding with its heterodox festival programming, Freewaves has also consistently broadcast a selection of videos on KCET and a myriad of local cable access channels in the greater Los Angeles area. This multi-platform strategy of distribution that moves between a festival circuit, museum installation video, and public broadcast and cablecast suggests that from

the outset Freewaves' dedication to public interest programming represented in much of the textual content of the festival's entries is simultaneously achieved through its parallel objective to expand video distribution through community outreach.

Freewaves is equally connected to the museum and gallery system and its satellite institutions: archives, private collections, distribution houses, and university collections. This loose aggregate of organizations traffics in that mode of alternative video practice more categorically akin to the studio arts. Although these institutions together perform the absolutely indispensable function of providing for the circulation, exhibition, and preservation of videos that might otherwise be lost or completely inaccessible, it is a distribution system based on placing very specific material constraints on the infinitely reproducible video object, greatly delimiting its circulation to cultural elites. The studio art model of alternative video has been plagued by an underlying contradiction between production and distribution. Much of video art production (especially early video art) has cleared a space of legitimacy for a *déclassé* (once) medium by explicitly and implicitly promoting democratized access to a category of rarified culture, "high" art; contrarily, its model of distribution has remained antithetical to the ideals of democratization and free communication in the public sphere inherent in the technological possibilities of the medium.

The paradox of this system is that it promotes video's accessibility by making it inaccessible. Rather than exploiting video's capacity for inexpensive mass distribution, the museum and gallery system has inflated the material value of the video object by disavowing and suppressing many of its inherent technological attributes and forcing it to circulate within an economy where market value is based on originality, scarcity, and cultural capital. Although this has produced a solvent distribution system, enabling institutions like Electronic Arts Intermix to archivally preserve ephemeral works, it has likewise condemned video to a fine art market model of access. The result is an unfortunate inconsistency: the very work that has inspired the most radical, destabilizing, and subversive individual textual statements within the art context, expanded generic categories of time-based art, destandardized the apparatus

of television into forms unimaginable within the broadcast/cablecast paradigm, fostered a unique politics of site-specificity, and contributed to a whole myriad of other progressive media experiments is mostly accessible to a selective community of privilege. With a profusion of single-channel, multi-channel, and installation work that falls within the video art category, a sizable portion of Freewaves' programming is grounded in the studio arts tradition; yet, the festival has made an effort to steer video away from a culturally elitist distribution system and redirect video art to communities and cultures that might not normally gain access to such work because of geographical or cultural obstacles. In addition to complimenting the public access ideal, the festival's multi-platform distribution experiments, events like road shows and community tape projects, generate opportunities for video art to circulate more widely among communities outside of the hermetic milieu of the art establishment.

The enduring commitment to the creative expansion of modes of distribution led Freewaves to attempt, in the late 1990s, to establish a 24-hour DBS (Direct Broadcast Satellite) channel devoted entirely to alternative and experimental video. Although organizationally similar to Deep Dish TV, Freewaves' proposal offered a variation on the Deep Dish network's devotion to PEG (public, educational, and governmental) and progressive left programming akin to Air America and Free Speech TV, with popular advocacy shows like *Democracy Now*. Freewaves sought to establish a channel that would not only show grassroots and activist work but also concentrate on artists' tapes, single-channel gallery work, and other genres of experimental video that have been almost exclusively accessible through the two major U.S. distributors of video art, Electronic Arts Intermix and Video Data Bank. However, as a consequence of FCC deregulation, the proposals for programming these non-profit channels are reviewed not by any public commission but by the same corporate management that owns these satellite systems, which severely hampered the effort through a kind of de-facto privatization of public access. Freewaves encountered other obstacles on the satellite front as well. On the public access side there was a palpable inertia brought about by an eroding sense of the

## LA FREEWAVES' TOO MUCH FREEDOM?

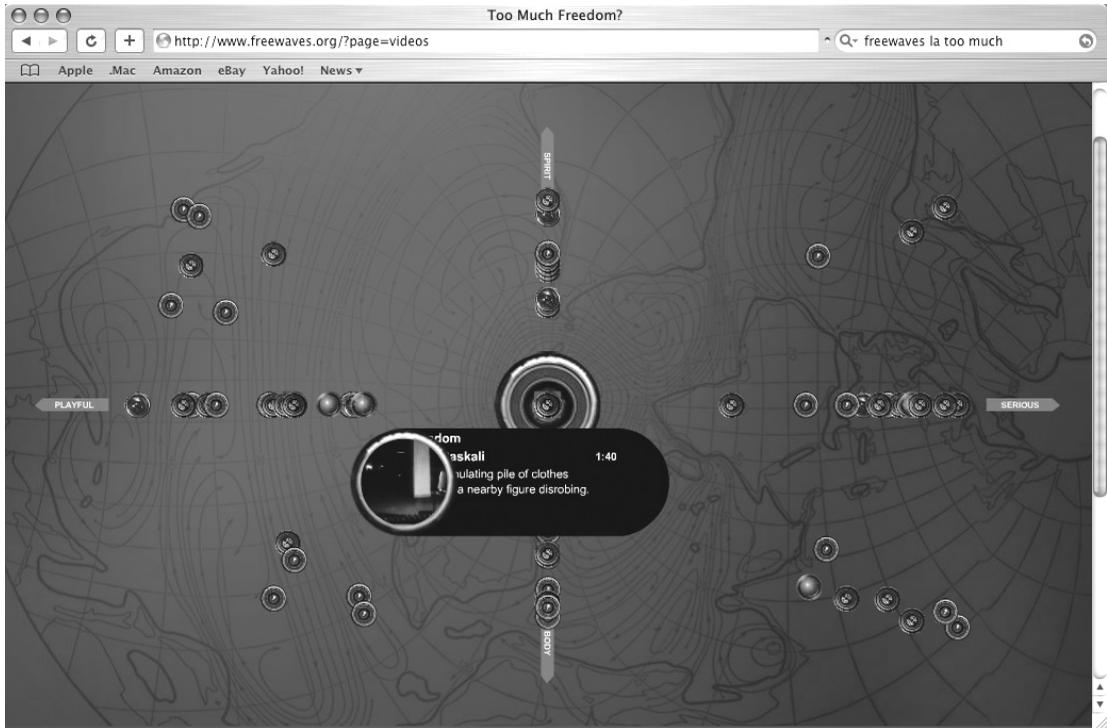
public sphere after nearly two decades of sustained neo-liberalist privatization.<sup>11</sup> On the museum and gallery side, the 1990s art world had given itself over to a deepening dependence upon corporate patronage and the complete penetration of video into the global art market, a market that could now finally trumpet its major international video superstars like Bill Viola and Gary Hill.

By 2005, after several years of embroilment with corporate DBS providers, Freewaves had all but abandoned the project and reinvested its energies into the rising potential of another form of alternative distribution: the Internet.<sup>12</sup> During the course of the DBS initiative, streaming video technology advanced significantly and had become more widely accessible on a global scale. The capacity to connect international curators, artists, and audiences through the Internet was another appealing alternative to the nationally restricted satellite network. Further, the Internet did not require the organization to navigate the litigious waters of communications policy and advanced technological systems; it could be produced quickly and inexpensively in a do-it-yourself fashion with

the simple acquisition of server space and a web designer.

## The Transition to Internet Distribution

The opening of *Too Much Freedom?* took place at the UCLA/Hammer Museum over a single weekend in early November 2006. For two consecutive evenings, the two-tiered central courtyard of the Hammer, a space that usually lies dormant as a kind of awkward outdoor lobby at the museum's center, was transformed into an iridescent video hyperspace buzzing with nearly fifty individual video loops projecting more than 100 alternative videos against the courtyard's inner façade. But despite the event/installation's voluminous content, a clearly defined curatorial statement could not have been more remote. Akin to the vagaries of its title, the installation itself wavered like an open-ended question. Replete with ambiguity generated by the excess of possibility, there was no clearly marked path, overarching theme or concept, or system of categorization to help organize this multiplicity of voices around a consistent narrative.



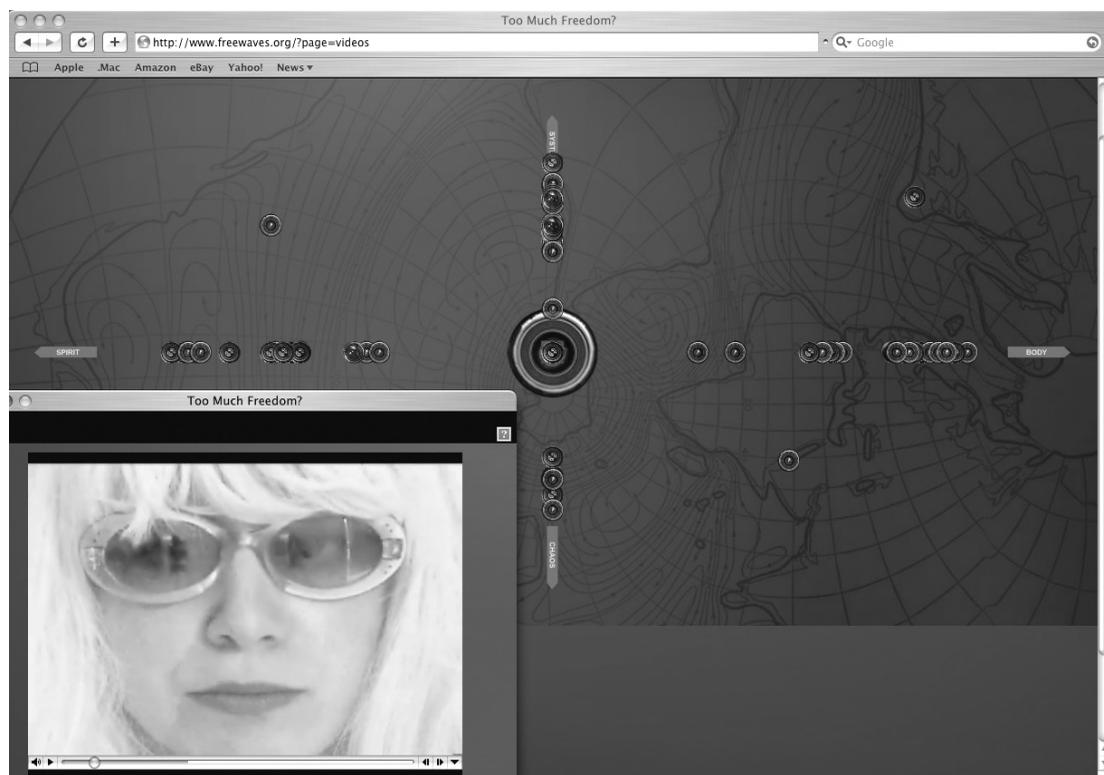
(Above and right) Navigating the interface of Freewaves' *Too Much Freedom?* homepage (<http://www.freewaves.org>).

Sound from the simultaneous loops reverberated throughout the space, which made engaging with a single video a veritable impossibility, and the lack of any wall text further contributed to a sense of disorientation. It is reasonably safe to assume that no two people experienced the installation in quite the same way, or even in the same order and duration. In the subdued illumination, the sense of a crowd dissipated all the more. Behind the radiant backdrop of video wallpaper, visitors appeared in anonymous silhouette, and the installation seemed fated to disrupt any awareness of the communal, as individuals appeared like vectors plotted in a three-dimensional grid.

However, from the center of the courtyard a sense of cohesion did emerge nonetheless. From here the entire space and all the video loops in it became visible from a single vantage point. Passing through this hub, one could stand apart for a moment and survey the installation as a single atmospheric work, and it was also from this same vantage point that the seemingly desultory arrangement revealed its function more clearly. Atop a group of tables at the center of the courtyard

were strewn a number of portable laptop computers where one could access the comprehensive collection of the videos on the newly launched festival permanent website. From the center of the exhibition the spectator thus became doubly immersed—once in the installation environment, and a second time in the web interface.

And from here, too, it became evident that the two spaces merged into one another. The *Too Much Freedom?* homepage (<http://www.freewaves.org>) first presents a spherical icon of a video lens encircled by a dense ring of identical diminutive lens icons around it, all set against the backdrop of an ambiguous map of the world that vaguely seems to detail the eddies and flows of ocean currents or airstreams in some kind of nonfunctional topographical chart. Two small arrows protrude horizontally from the outer ring creating a composite image that resembles a compass whose needle points due east and west. With this it becomes clear that the website, just like the installation itself, is organized around the theme of ambiguous navigation. With the first click of the mouse, the two arrows become differentiated not



## LA FREEWAVES' TOO MUCH FREEDOM?

by words of direction but by conceptual opposition. Now bearing the terms “freedom” and “control,” the arrows glide outward to either side of the webpage, and the ring reshapes itself into a horizontal line of lenses, bisecting the page and revealing two more identical sets of arrowed axes also marked by opposing terms, one perpendicular and the other diagonal in orientation. As the user points and clicks on any of the three sets of arrows, she flips through a changing list of binary oppositions: freedom/control real/fake, somewhere/nowhere, self/other, etc., each of which, when clicked, scatters the tiny lenses into various configurations and clusters across the open space of the webpage. It gradually becomes evident that what appear to be random formations of lens icons are actually shifting constellations of points precisely plotted along the X, Y, and Z axes of a three-dimensional coordinate system. Each point, each tiny lens, is a link to one of the festival videos as a streaming Quicktime media file. The search navigator is in essence a scatter-plot graph that redistributes each icon as a vector point plotted in a three-dimensional grid according to the assigned numerical value that video has in relationship to any of the binary categories. Sorting through a constantly shifting array of objects, the user selects the festival titles by choosing different combinations of categories and watches the selection become graphically represented in topological space. One might, for example, conjure the intersecting subset of videos that have been rated with a relatively high numerical value for the categories freedom, real, and self and then find all of those videos clustered together in a specific region of the page.

Building from its commitment to various forms of alternative distribution, the *Too Much Freedom?* web interface marks an important shift for LA Freewaves. Although the festival is by no means new to the Internet and has posted extensive video programs and clips on websites past, these sites have always been secondary in nature. The earlier Freewaves sites are permanently archived catalogs of every work screened during the primary event, and their main purpose is to stand as residual historical documents of every video screened in the festival since 2002. On them one can search by the familiar categories: artist name, title, date, curator, etc. In contrast, *Too Much Freedom?* marks an

important tactical reversal of that earlier function. It is the first time that the website is not intended as a residual archive of the public exhibition, but as the primary mode of distribution. The situation of the 2006 festival is inverted; the web interface is the festival and the public exhibition is secondary, only there, in large part, to launch the website.

A more jaundiced take on this might suggest that Freewaves is simply following the recent marketing tendencies of the mainstream film industry, whose declining box office has caused it to reposition theatrical exhibition as a promotional loss-leader to the more profitable forms of viewer-controlled access, such as DVD, cable television, movies on demand, and the Internet. But I think the turn away from theatrical exhibition is more than just a pragmatic adjustment to the latest trends in reception and that the festival is reforming itself to critically engage with the myriad ways in which video is now being used. By producing a minor subversion of the standardized Internet archive, the interface becomes a crucially important part of the festival statement, equally if not more than the videos themselves.

It does this by operating like a dysfunctional database that subverts the standardized categories and conventions within the traditional search engine. The aberrant organization of the festival database complicates the guiding presupposition that video websites should be primarily utilitarian nature. Navigation tools that would normally be employed to expedite a user's access to a desired clip, here deliberately prolong and complicate the search process, which becomes like a disjointed, enigmatic drift through a darkened courtyard. One is thus made reflexively aware of the artificial and arbitrary way in which the database often determines the meaning of the object it appears to offer up with disinterest and neutrality. The standard search engine is generally thought of as a mere means to an end, and a productive user interface—it is presumed—should be a transparent tool that delivers content with greater and greater precision, refinement, and acceleration. The more a platform becomes inconspicuous, the more it privileges content and text over procedure, the better the interface. In the case of *Too Much Freedom?*, however, a user is made all too aware of how the interface determines the meanings of the video

clips it contains. Positing a series of ambiguous binary categories, it makes an oblique critique of the Manichean rigidity and ideological biases built into the structure of information systems. At first, the categories might seem to provide a coherent framework for understanding the content, but this framework deliberately fails to edify the user and to categorically group or order the videos in any meaningful way. This strategic failure is a commentary on the way in which content is inevitably determined by the prescriptive nature of the distribution paradigm that contains it; it implies that an alternative video movement that has been overdetermined by alternative content must strategically rethink its model of distribution, especially at a moment when distribution is undergoing a profound technological and cultural mutation.

But I should here take a moment to clarify that in my advocacy for this return to distribution I don't at all mean to minimize the importance of aesthetics, content, themes, politics, and modes of production. The discrete text is still an essential component in determining counter-hegemonic forms of video culture, and without texts whose internal conditions challenge and disrupt dominant forms of media production, an independent distribution movement would mean very little. So I have never meant to suggest that, in the new logic of distribution, there is no difference between, say, indigenous media, surveillance video art, AIDS activist video, and the *CBS Evening News*. These distinctions remain as important as ever. The determining conditions of alternative content should simply become more directly connected to and integrated with their modes of distribution. Alternative distribution should be thoroughly integrated into experimental content; the two should be constantly shaping and reshaping one another. A particular content or aesthetic statement should never be assessed independently of its context and mode of circulation throughout the social body, and in many cases distribution might even determine content. The manner in which a video circulates through culture and is appropriated and redistributed by other artists and viewers is every bit as important as what it says. By calling for a reemphasis on distribution, I am really advocating a paradigm that makes production and

distribution, content and access indissociable. A viable alternative movement within the Internet videosphere will greatly depend on a similar emphasis on the organizational process over any individual statement within that process.<sup>13</sup>

Freewaves is one of the first major alternative video festivals to transition to the Internet as a means of connecting to a broader audience outside of an immediate geographic locality, and this is an early sign that the issue of distribution is again moving to the fore in shaping alternative practice. As a kind of pioneering experiment, the effect of this on the traditional alternative video distributors has yet to be determined. The two most important collections of alternative video, Electronic Arts Intermix and Video Data Bank, only use streaming video as a way delivering low-resolution trailers for institutionally priced videotapes. But as much as Freewaves might be setting a trend, it is also following one. This festival is happening at the exact moment when video's popular distribution is undergoing a significant transition. What the medium signifies and how it is used is, in many senses, drastically different than what it was even five years prior, so it becomes necessary to read this return to alternative distribution against the backdrop of a new video vernacular. And this leads to crucial set of questions: How might the Internet actually be used as a means of alternative distribution in a culture in which video has acquired a very different use value? Can the Internet become be a substitute for broadcast, cablecast, or satellite transmission? or must it be seen as something else? What does the term "alternative" mean when the culture of the video, patterns of spectatorship and interaction, and notions of community are all in flux?

Answers to such questions are far beyond the scope of this essay and must be left to future investigations, but it might be helpful to conclude with a few observations about how Freewaves in fact derives some of its own interventions from more general trends of the Internet videosphere. When grafted onto the Internet, any individual program, tape, or artist statement may not have the same cultural currency it does in the defied parameters of a theatrical video festival, a public access program, or even a gallery or museum exhibition. This primarily occurs because the

## LA FREEWAVES' TOO MUCH FREEDOM?

vernacular, user-defined culture of the Internet treats video as an object of a very different character, not at all grounded in the subjectivity of its creator or the sanctity of its textual statement. In the Internet videosphere, a video file is less of a revered self-contained statement and more of a fragment to be used, redistributed, and constantly re-contextualized by the viewer. If Raymond Williams first diagnosed broadcast television as an undifferentiated and unending video flow without boundaries, from one program to the next,<sup>14</sup> the Internet videosphere might be characterized by culture of the clip. Every streaming video, Quicktime, or mpeg file exists merely as a loose fragment to be downloaded, broken into segments, reassembled, reedited, and embedded among other clips, etc. The clip in isolation has no real significance, and the culture of the clip treats video as a substance with neither content nor creator, a substance of pure exchange value in an anti-symbolic economy.

Although Freewaves promotes an alternative distribution model that connects to very recent material transformations within the Internet videosphere, critiques the searchable archive with an alternative web interface, promotes free distribution of artist and activist video, and expands access beyond the geographical boundaries of Los Angeles, in other ways it undercuts these advances and retains many of the mechanisms that delimit access. The *Too Much Freedom?* website may mark a sea change in festival distribution, but in terms of the nature and the direction of the flows of data and communication, the site very much adheres to a one-way broadcast paradigm delivering content from a centralized point of dissemination. While the innovative structure of its web interface destabilizes some of the more instrumental aspects of the archive and the search engine, it still ultimately addresses a video viewer rather than the user immersed in the culture of the clip. Its format disables participation in a massive public user-driven economy of video circulation. Rather than opening channels that travel in both directions—permitting users to comment, post, exchange, and perhaps even alter and disrupt the sites' collection of video streams—the viewer of *Too Much Freedom?* very much receives content as a one-way feed. The site does not enable posting of

any kind, and aside from providing email and web links to some of the artists in the festival, there is no way to respond to the videos at all, much less respond in a way that becomes part of the festival content. Nor does the site provide any way to connect and communicate with other users. In this sense, the festival still privileges the authority of the cultural producer over that of the viewer. It therefore fundamentally adheres to a traditional notion of textuality invested in the self-contained statement bolstered by categories of individual authorship. Yet in the Internet videosphere the idea of the singular statement tied to an individualized artistic vision rattles with a kind of awkward obsolescence. In short, where the site subverts the instrumentality of the video archive and database, it also fails to build a sustaining a wiki-community, a place that might become an open hub for various kinds of video exchanges that can help sustain and build a sense of dialogue among the new users across geographical distances, jointly committed to an alternative sensibility and the possibility of reshaping the contours of that site as a form of open-source culture.<sup>15</sup>

This leads to a final question about how the recent *Too Much Freedom?* festival might represent a transitional bridge between public broadcasting and public access cable, and new forms of Internet distribution constantly appearing on the horizon: what does it mean to introduce an alternative form of distribution based on egalitarian principles of exchange, communication, and public debate into an infrastructure and culture that operates under a system that is decentered, viral, and neither private nor public? The Habermasian notion of an enlightened public sphere is in many ways what drove the collective, democratic ideal of public television and the early cable access movement. Of course, paradoxically, it was precisely at the moment when a declining belief in the political efficacy of mobilizing a social body under the auspices of “the public” that video sought out that public through cable access. But although the vitality of public access has faded as a model, the achievement of turning the conversation toward the issue of distribution is an important legacy that should now be taken up and applied in the present technological, cultural, and economic situation, even as we are yet unsure of its outcome. Freewaves

has made an important step toward rethinking the way in which the alternative video movement might engage and transform the Internet videosphere. The 2006 festival opened a space for us to begin a discussion about what access means for video communities seeking to put forward marginalized,

dissenting, and alternative points of view. And the issue of distribution is central to this conversation, as the Internet videosphere is starting to radically reform the way in which users engage with the medium and circulate within the social formation.

---

**Kenneth Rogers** is Assistant Professor of New Media in the Department of the History of Art at University of California, Riverside. His research interests include experimental film, video art, contemporary photography, and new media. His current book project, *Perceived Time: Boredom and Temporality in Experimental Media Art*, maintains that the turn to phenomenology and embodiment in contemporary visual art from the mid-1960s forward must be understood in closer proximity to the sustained exploration of new media technology that also marks the period.

## Notes

1. I have borrowed the term “videosphere” from Gene Youngblood, although I am not necessarily using the term as he originally conceived it. One can trace the term’s original usage back to media ecology of the 1960s to refer to the in-folding of media with culture, perception, systems of knowledge, and the built environment. See Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970).
2. Here I am referring to Brecht’s infamous essay on the radio as a technological metaphor for a potentially interactive public sphere. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*, trans. and ed. Jon Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964). [“Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat” in *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheaters*, Darmstadt, No. 16, July 1932].
3. This emphasis on distribution is broadly true of political contestation on the Internet in general, of which video is only the latest manifestation. The contest over peer-to-peer distribution of recorded music and file sharing and the more recent debate over “net neutrality” (the struggle over equal access to root servers that might fall to privatization and as a consequence centralize access to the high-traffic pinch points) are two such examples.
4. For a history of the guerrilla TV movement see Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
5. Much has been written on the history of alternative video and its tendency of naïve faith placed in idea that access to technology can alone democratize the means of production. See, for example, William Boddy, “Alternative Television in the United States,” *Screen*, 31, no. 1 (1990): 91–101.
6. Established in 1955, NET survived on grants from the Ford Foundation and became known, especially in its later years, for hard-hitting and often controversial cultural, public affairs, and documentary programming. Reviled by the Nixon administration for promoting the counter-cultural and effete urban values above those of the “silent majority,” the network’s subversive edge was softened with the establishment of CPB and the replacement of NET with PBS in 1970. Although this did provide more funding for certain kinds of video experimentation, it also put PBS on a shorter leash regarding the programming of content against the established order of things. This transition marks the beginning of public broadcasting as a site of political and ideological struggle in the culture wars. For a more detailed examination of this transition, see Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You: How Public TV Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 175–187.
7. For a history of the important role played by these two institutions in the support of alternative and experimental video, see Marita Sturken, “Private Money and Personal Influence: Howard Klein and the Rockefeller Foundation’s Funding of the Media Arts,” *Afterimage* (January 1987) and Marita Sturken, “The TV Lab at WNET/Thirteen,” Susan Dowling, “The WGBH New Television Workshop,” and Joanne Kelly “The National Center for Experiments in Television KQED,” all in *Transmission*, ed. Peter D’Agostino (New York: Tanam Press, 1985).
8. *The Medium is the Medium* was the first public broadcast of independent video art in the United States. Produced, shot, and aired at WGBH Boston in 1969, the 30-minute program was produced by Fred Barzyk, Anne Gresser, and Pat Marx and included works by Nam June Paik, Allan Kaprow, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Thomas Tadlock, and Aldo Tambellini. Paik’s *Global Groove* (1973), also produced at WGBH, is another noteworthy example of a piece whose very content indirectly advocates for a progressive distribution model based on principles of Media Ecology.
9. Quite obviously, part of the reason for this is a matter of technological limitation. Broadcast networks are large, complex organisms that involve a huge amount of labor and capital, making the idea of a directly democratic form of distribution infeasible for a medium whose early development was advanced by private sector interests.

## LA FREEWAVES' TOO MUCH FREEDOM?

10. For a more nuanced account than I am able to detail here of video's trajectory through the public sphere between 1965 and 1985, see Martha Gever, "Pressure Points: Video in the Public Sphere," *Art Journal* (Fall 1985): 238-243.

11. See Patricia Aufderheide, "The Missing Space on Satellite TV" in *The Daily Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 154-172.

12. Many of the debates about the sustainability of a network devoted to alternative video were taken up in a yearlong series of unpublished panel discussions in 2002 hosted by Freewaves, *TV or Not TV: Arts and Mass Media*. Nine separate discussions involving alternative media artists, critics, curators, academics, and entertainment industry professionals dealt with various topics about the contemporary state of the relationship of television and mass media to independent and alternative culture. The unpublished lectures included topics such as the historical relationship between art and television, globalization, and TV vs. the Web, and were a general source for this paper.

13. In an article about Deep Dish TV, Patricia Thompson articulates this essential interpenetration between content and distribution. "The individual tape matters, of course, as does the number of people watching. But unlike most television, neither the product nor the audience statistics are as important as the organizational *process* required to create a decentralized network that works on a community level. The success of Deep Dish TV will in large part be measured by how durable this network is. [...] The community networks are the key to the entire project. They were instrumental in soliciting work; they will be active in publicizing the series; and they are the sole means by which 'Deep Dish TV' will be cablecast." Patricia Thompson, "What Goes Up Must Come Down," *Afterimage* (April 1996): 3.

14. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).

15. This last point raises another important set of questions about the current and future impact of the new festival format on Freewaves' ongoing commitment to local community outreach. So much of what has defined LA Freewaves' past efforts has been its unique way of using video as a means of breaking through the geographical barriers of the Southern California landscape. For nearly two decades Freewaves has become known for holding screenings in both the established art venues of Los Angeles as well as unconventional screening sites in districts of the city redlined out of the zones of cultural capital. Even if the new online festival format does eventually enable users to edit, create, and change web content, interact with other viewers, and potentially establish a global alternative video community, how does this shift in access affect the important local interventions it has made in the past? What does it mean if a Festival makes a minimal footprint within the material infrastructure of the city whose name it bears? What happens to local grassroots video interventions? Does there necessarily need to be a new kind of virtual outreach? Does the turn to web distribution really bring communities together? Or does it produce obstacles to in doing so, like trying to reconnect with a group of friends in the darkened hyperspace of the Hammer? What does this mean for global communities that have limited or no access to the Internet or even for local users who lack sufficient bandwidth to receive streaming video?