The popular, received narrative describing the democratizing effect of digital video on the media goes something like this, spelled out here by novelist Sherman Alexie:

Anybody can afford to make a movie today. The moviemaking process has finally become egalitarian and populist. You can buy good video cameras, quality sound equipment, and effective editing systems for $10,000 or $5,000 or $1,000 or $500. Over the course of a few months or years, a poor reservation Indian kid can collect $1,000 worth of discarded aluminum cans from ditches and garbage cans, spend $500 on her equipment, and then spend another $500 to make a movie about the sad beauty of aluminum cans and their relationship to Native American health, economics, and politics.¹

I would like to highlight three assumptions Alexie makes that characterize this narrative: 1) what has prevented all but the rich or well funded from making a film is production-related cost; 2) technological progress has made media production cheaper, eliminating this barrier and giving everyone the chance to become a filmmaker; 3) consequently, the revolution in media democracy to which we are now bearing witness represents a clean break with the past. “Moviemaking was previously one of the most expensive art forms,” writes Peter Broderick of now-defunct Next Wave Films. “Now, for the first time, independent filmmakers can afford to own the means of both production and postproduction;”² indeed, this shift is “seismic.”³ Novelist William Gibson summarizes: “Digital cinema has the potential to throw open the process of filmmaking, to make the act more universally available, to demythologize it.”⁴

On the surface, the evidence in support of these claims seems incontrovertible. Each step in the evolution of video has made the medium accessible to more and more people. With the introduction of the video Portapak in the late 1960s, the VHS-format camcorder in
the late 1970s, and 8mm and Hi-8 camcorders in the 1980s and early 1990s, analog video became cheaper and more portable, to the benefit of independent moviemakers and home videographers alike. The introduction of digital video and the mini-DV format in the mid-1990s continued this trend, while home-based postproduction became more feasible thanks both to the home computer’s increasing capabilities and to the introduction of consumer-grade editing software such as Apple’s Final Cut Pro. Suddenly, a mere $400 will buy a low-end consumer-level mini-DV camera, while $3,000 will buy the “prosumer-level” Canon XL1. With mini-DV camera in hand, shooting and preparing to edit an hour’s worth of footage costs only about $20, in contrast to the nearly $5,000 necessary for 35mm film. Even film school has become less expensive: by the estimates of Utne’s Erin Ferdinand, tuition to Emerson College Film School runs $24,000 a year, making cyberfilmschool.com’s $49 tuition seem paltry in comparison.

However, this discourse is misleading. To begin with, attempts to democratize participation in the media are not new. Nor, for that matter, is the discourse that accompanies them. This discourse has obscured various constraints affecting the production and distribution of amateur films in a social and political system where because “consumer technologies like movie cameras [have been] drafted into an idealization of the family,” amateurs find their access to the means of public distribution limited. My purpose in this paper, then, is to explore these constraints and, in so doing, problematize the three characteristics of the rhetoric of media democratization described above. Specifically, I contend that: 1) constraints related to distribution represent a more important obstacle to amateur filmmakers than production-related cost; 2) the obstacle of distribution limits the audience most amateur filmmakers can reach; 3) consequently, the ostensible revolution in media democracy is not as complete as it might appear on the surface.

To make sense of these contentions, it is important first to consider the historical precedents of both the rhetoric of media democratization and the efforts made by those trying to put media to more democratic use. After such a contextualization, I will consider the obstacles faced by amateur filmmakers, placing special emphasis on that of distribution. Finally, I will discuss one solution in particular to which filmmakers are turning to overcome these obstacles: microcinemas, “small venue[s] or cinema[s], moving or temporary,” distinguished from mainstream cinemas by their social function of creating an intimate setting in which to bring people together to watch a film.

**Historical Precedents**

The current rhetoric of media democratization inscribes itself in a long line of discourse concerned with the relationship between technology and democracy. Daniel Czitrom observes that a certain utopian rhetoric has accompanied the “popular excitement surrounding each new development of communications technology,” especially in the North American context. In the US in particular, the same could be said of the development of any technology: John Kasson, in his examination of Americans’ relationship to technology from 1776 to 1900, asserts that “the expectations Americans have historically brought to their technology are profoundly rooted in their understanding of the entire republican experiment.” James Carey and John Quirk trace a similar trend with respect to Americans’ relation specifically to electricity. Joseph Corn generalizes: “Beginning in the nineteenth century, commentators in industrializing countries had considered social and moral progress to flow inexorably from scientific discoveries and technological innovations.”

Others have contended that what matters is access to technology rather than the technology’s intrinsic qualities: democracy improves when access to the means of media production becomes more generalized. This
perspective has had a certain currency in media studies, perhaps because the costs of media production are constantly decreasing. Henry Jenkins cites the “explosion of newsletters and ‘zines” in the 1970s and 80s as evidence of this trend, a list to which Reason’s Jesse Walker adds the proliferation of “home-brewed CDs.”14 It has been especially apparent in discussions of visual media. Alissa Quart, for instance, sees “a resurgence of documentary filmmaking, thanks in part to the advent of the cheaper, lighter digital format that helped to offset the daunting costs of pursuing political aims through film,” and Yves Rousseau likens the emergence of microcinemas to the emergence of the French New Wave, itself made possible by “important technological advances: light cameras and more sensitive film.”15 The advent of portable video cameras in the 1980s even inspired Francis Ford Coppola to describe a dream not unlike Alexie’s cited above:

For me the great hope is now that 8-millimeter video recorders are coming out, people who normally wouldn’t make movies are going to be making them. And that one day a little fat girl in Ohio is going to be the new Mozart and make a beautiful film with her father’s camcorder. For once the so-called professionalism about movies will be destroyed and it will really become an art form.16

Media activists such as Richard Edwards are quick to warn against the “technological determinism [that] underlies these types of utopian aspirations regarding new technologies,” however.17 He and activists like him are concerned more with the use to which media are put than with technology’s inherent qualities: new media technologies can lead to greater participation in a democratic system only when put to deliberately political use. The resulting political engagement is exemplified by the Paper Tiger video collective, which in 1979 brought together community organizers to produce programs for distribution on public access cable stations in Manhattan. Two specific technologies made the group possible: first, cable with its quickly expanding reach and second, the “[l]ightweight, high-quality, portable equipment that [could] produce programming for a cost that [was] within the reach of individuals and groups” in countries such as the US.18

Because the members of Paper Tiger deal explicitly with the marginalization facing amateur media, an understanding of their approach is useful for understanding the role microcinemas seek to play. DeeDee Halleck explains: “the product was never the goal. It’s the process, of course, but more than the process, it’s the potential power that a popular diffuse medium could possibly unlock.”19 Predicating their activities on the notion that the “contradiction between producers and consumers is not inherent in the electronic media,” and that in fact, “it has to be artificially reinforced by economic and administrative means,”20 the Paper Tiger members use their programs to draw attention to the political economy of corporate media. With this emphasis on process rather than product, they hope to shift control over media content away from a centralized corporate structure toward a structure responsive to local community needs. Even their methods of distribution reflect this desire: their strategy has been “low tech and hybrid” and has included distributing “dupes” to be screened “on [public] access cable, on low-power broadcast, in museum and artists’ spaces, in schools and universities, in group meetings at homes and offices.”21 Success, then, is something other than the ability to reach a mass audience: success is opening up the channels of communication to those who might not otherwise have access to them. While Paper Tiger’s decentralized model of communication has clearly not replaced the dominant commercial system in the US, the group’s longevity is a testimony to its success in providing the means for local voices to reach local audiences.

Of “Indies” and “Amateurs”

At the point where this discussion of the relationship of technology to media
Rethinking the Amateur

Democratization narrows to a discussion of digital video, it becomes necessary to examine more closely the category of “independent” or “indie” itself. What makes this category problematic is the wide range of filmmakers to which it can be applied. Surely Alexie’s Indian kid and Coppola’s little fat girl are “indies”; but for that matter, so is Wim Wenders, whose Buena Vista Social Club—much of which was recorded on consumer-level mini-DV cameras—might be better described as a “big-budget” indie film.

What, then, differentiates Alexie’s and Coppola’s indie filmmakers from Indies like Wenders? After all, Coppola and company are correct in pointing out that advances in technology have mitigated cost as an obstacle to the means of production and post-production. But this discussion stops too soon, neglecting the question of access to channels of distribution.

The funding that helps Indies gain access to these channels is still very much a deciding factor in determining which filmmakers will reach an audience beyond that of the private sphere, to which amateurs have traditionally been limited. For distribution in traditional theaters, digitally recorded films such as Buena Vista Social Club must still be transferred to film at a cost—$1,500 to $2,500 per print—that can be prohibitive for unfunded amateurs. While there has been much hype about the possibility of digital distribution, especially surrounding the release of the two latest installments of the Star Wars series, costs have not yet come down to a point where this option is viable for theater owners, who must spend about $100,000 to install digital projection systems; despite George Lucas’s initial insistence that Attack of the Clones would be distributed only to digitally equipped theaters, only 51 of 3,161 theaters in the US and Canada were able to project the film digitally when it was released in May 2002.

Indies and amateurs do have distribution options open to them other than traditional distribution of prints. First, there are film festivals: high-profile festivals such as Sundance and Toronto have begun giving digital formats more exposure, and festivals such as “Digital Democracy 2003” in Memphis, Tennessee, have cropped up specifically showcasing the “new vanguard of do-it-yourself filmmakers.”

There’s even a Nomad VideoFilm Festival, “an annual traveling show featuring an assortment of shorts films and videos from around the world,” an idea some ambitious filmmakers take a step further by taking their films on self-promoted rock-style tours.

The Internet also has its role to play in amateur film distribution, which should not be surprising, given its growing ubiquity at least in the US and Canada. In addition to serving as a point of sale for VHS and DVD copies of films, the Internet seems to promise a panacea for low-budget distribution in the form of video streaming. A number of sites, including atomfilms.com, thebitscreen.com, ifilm.net, bijoucafe.com, and undergroundfilm.com, offer streaming content. Commercial sites such as movielink.com also offer pay-per-view movie downloads from Sony, Universal, MGM, Paramount, and Warner Brothers, as well as from indie distributor Artisan.

The ease with which filmmakers can upload their films to the Internet, though, leads to a situation where sheer quantity becomes an obstacle for viewers trying to find anything of quality, whatever their definition of “quality.” This proliferation of films, Walker contends, has led to a somewhat paradoxical (and not all bad) redefinition of “success”: while many people find many of the films boring or unwatchable, filmmakers have the luxury of not having to measure success by the size of the audience they reach but by their ability to reach a select, niche audience of their own design. When web-based films do become popular, as often as not it is by way of electronic word-of-mouth as people pass links to films among themselves via e-mail.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to online distribution, at least at present, is the set of limits imposed by the size of the files that video generates. While various compression programs can reduce the size of the files to be
stored by the host site, they do so at the price of video and sound quality. Also, the larger the file, the more information to transmit, which becomes problematic in direct proportion to the speed and quality of the viewer’s Internet connection. Consequently, most Internet movies must be viewed on “a tiny screen within a screen, with the action periodically halted for ‘rebuffering’ or rendered herky-jerky by a slow or congested connection,” meaning that “the most successful Net films [...] tend to be short, visually uncomplicated, and, ultimately, trivial.”

The Microcinema Movement

One solution to which some filmmakers are turning is that of microcinemas. The movement in its present incarnation dates back to the early 1990s, although Taso Lagos sees historical precedents as far back as the cave paintings in Lascaux. The term “microcinema” was coined in 1991 by Rebecca Barten and David Sherman, founders of the Total Mobile Home Microcinema in San Francisco, who envisioned “an alternative movement, a sort of cinematic microbrewery.” Venues for contemporary microcinemas vary, from the more prosaic, such as bars and coffee shops, to the more exotic, such as a public bath in disuse in Montreal or an old gunpowder factory in Belgrade.

Microcinema organizers have often seen their efforts in terms of reclamation of public space and provision of a forum for the presentation of alternative points of view. Not coincidentally, they often profess a strong belief in the rhetoric of media democratization:

What this so-called “democratization of the medium” means to moviemakers and their audiences is that the leveling of the playing field will allow more unique and diverse voices to be heard. There is no doubt a revolution is happening in the film and video industry and, now, everyone can be part of this history.

Microcinemas, however, do not entirely escape the constraints outlined thus far and, indeed, are quite heterogeneous by nature, shaped as they are by the obstacles they must overcome. These obstacles include, among others, finding a locale, buying projection equipment, finding films to screen, and reaching a prospective audience.

Although it is impossible to say how many microcinemas are operating worldwide—or even in the US and Canada—because they “live and die by the passions and pocketbooks of their founders,” by 2002, the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers listed over 1,000 such venues in its Film and Video Exhibitors Guide. Microcinemas run the gamut in terms of what they offer and how they are funded: whereas San Francisco’s Other Cinema, focusing on “literally [...] ‘other’ cinema: ethnography, pornography, amateur work,” is funded entirely by the $5 admission charged at the door, Seattle’s Honkworm International grossed over $1 million in corporate sponsorships in 1999 by selling animations to companies such as Apple and Microsoft. In addition to offering a venue for screenings, microcinemas such as Rooftop Films in New York can also offer equipment, while others such as Kino in Montreal can offer a video “laboratory” where filmmakers can experiment and collaborate.

In order to understand the constraints within which microcinemas operate, I would like to examine two groups more closely, San Francisco-based Microcinema International (MI) and Montreal-based Kino. The comparison is useful because the two microcinemas, while structured along different lines (MI as a business, Kino as a filmmaking collective), are both long-lived and have each established a local and an international presence.

MI grew out of Blackchair Productions, founded by Joel S. Bachar in Seattle in 1992. In 1996, Patrick Kwiatkowski became Bachar’s partner, and in 2000 they formed Microcinema International with the mission,
works are typically marginalized by the mainstream entertainment industry.38

MI moved to San Francisco after a fire destroyed its Seattle venue in May 2001.

In addition to hosting local screenings, MI serves as a touchpoint for a loose syndicate of independent filmmakers and organizations related to producing or screening independent films. As of March 4, 2004, its website included information about 978 individual filmmakers, curators, and festival organizers (primarily from North America and Western Europe), 1,126 films, 430 organizations, and 184 programs and compilations. MI also curates and produces Independent Exposure, a “monthly microcinema screening program of international short films, videos and digital works” screened in San Francisco and Houston and distributed internationally: since 1996, Independent Exposure has presented the works of over 1,000 filmmakers in more than 40 countries.39 This is one site where the constraint imposed by the sheer quantity of films becomes apparent. On the one hand, Bachar organized Independent Exposure out of frustration at not receiving any response from festivals to which he had submitted videos; on the other, with the growth in the number of people able to produce films and videos, “there’s going to be a lot of footage to wade through, which is where grassroots gatekeepers like [...] Bachar come in.”40

Another obstacle to overcome, one common to many alternative arts organizations, is that of funding. Rob Kenner describes Bachar in 1999 as having “no income to speak of. For a while last year, he had no apartment. He cruises the city streets in his beat-up yellow Subaru, stopping in at film events, dropping off flyers, making connections.”41 Now, MI is funded by grants and by revenue derived from licensing films and videos in its collection, making it the funded central point through which many parts of a decentralized movement pass. It is, in fact, the deliberate choice to structure MI as a business operating at the intersection of art and commerce to which Bachar attributes the microcinema’s success.
and longevity: this structure, along with the mainstream credibility it has engendered, has allowed MI to give a “stronger voice” to the “underground, anarchist, independent, artistic, controversial, culture jamming types of works” it presents.\textsuperscript{42}

In contrast to MI with its business-oriented approach, Kino, whose name derives from the Greek kinèsis meaning “movement,” has adopted an approach oriented toward filmmakers and the craft of filmmaking, although the group also facilitates the distribution of Kino-made films within an international network of Kino “clones.” Kino began in December 1998, when Christian Laurence, struggling to find funding after having graduated with a film degree from the Université du Québec à Montréal, challenged some of his friends to make one film a month until the year 2000 in what he called a “jam session for filmmakers.”\textsuperscript{43} The films were screened beginning in January 1999 in whatever venue the group could find. By 2001, the Kinoïtes, as Kino members are called, gave up the one-film-a-month system, substituting a system whereby when they screened one film, they would set a deadline for themselves for their next one. By 2002, 450 spectators were showing up each month, and Kino moved to the larger Plaza Cinema. Then, in March 2002, Daniel Langlois, founder of the successful 3-D animation company Softimage, offered Kino rent-free headquarters in Ex-Centris, Montreal’s ultra-hip arts complex.

Kino emerged in an environment where funding for arts in general and for independent film in particular, in Canada as well as in the US, was being squeezed by conservative government policies looking to corporations to fund art: “Why should the
government foot the bill when Bell, Chevy and McDonald’s will?" As Telefilm Canada “introduced changes to its Canadian Feature Film Fund by creating so-called performance envelopes, which ensure that producers with box-office success will be guaranteed further funding—and less government intervention,” Kino sought to assert its independence. With this in mind, it adopted the motto “Faites bien avec rien, faites mieux avec peu, et faites-le maintenant!” (Do well with nothing, better with a little, and do it right now!).

Here, as in the case of MI, certain tensions are manifest. First, Kino is democratically apolitical: says Laurence, “Kino doesn’t have a political or artistic statement to make. We just believe in having creative freedom.” Consequently, there is no selection committee. Kinoïtes readily admit that the resulting quality of films is often uneven, which Rousseau explains by observing that “most Kinoïtes haven’t thought much about the consequences of the act of filming. They are the product of an educational system that emphasizes expression over mastery of the means of expression.” This focus on individual expression finds its complement, however, in Kino’s focus on a collective approach to filmmaking: because Kino is “an art without great means of production, it’s the norm for Kinoïtes to share material and expertise.”

Much like MI, the Montreal Kino serves as a paradoxical center of a decentralized network. Kino groups have formed in 21 cities, mostly in Québec but also in places ranging from Madison, Wisconsin to Helsinki to Réunion Island. Filmmakers create films...
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for their local Kinos, and the Montreal branch facilitates exchanges, both of Kinoïtes and of film collections, between its clones. Funding is again an issue: the Montreal Kino would struggle to serve as this center without the support it receives from Langlois, and yet, the group has recently begun to raise funds in order to be able to afford to continue. The rapid growth of the movement is also cause for concern: there is the fear that the larger the movement becomes, the more likely it is to lose “its human warmth, which worries Kino’s founders, who do not want to close the door to anyone.”

Discussion and Conclusion

There is no doubt that, despite the constraints within which they must operate, microcinemas have overcome certain obstacles that film distributors relying on Internet video streaming have struggled with: microcinemas can guarantee an audience, they can provide quality projection (or at least projection on a large screen in a darkened room), and, perhaps most importantly, they maintain the “20th century ritual of a dark, cavernous room full of strangers, all looking through the same window.” This is not to say that they have ignored the lessons learned by Internet distributors; on the contrary, they share an understanding of the important redefinition of success in terms of the ability to reach an audience of the filmmaker’s own choosing. Directors of films screened at microcinemas are often able to attend and meet with audience members in person, which allows filmmakers and audiences to refocus on local, material realities—something that is all but impossible for filmmakers and audiences of commercial films distributed as widely as possible. Microcinema filmmakers and organizers have also clearly learned many of the same lessons as their public access cable counterparts, including the importance of process, apparent in Kino’s emphasis on experimentation and mutual aid.

Still, because of their size, microcinemas constantly risk marginality: as Lagos points out, independent cinemas, out of which he sees contemporary microcinemas emerging in the early 1990s, experienced periodic boom periods throughout the twentieth century, only to succumb to economic pressure exerted by vertically integrated studios in the 1920s and 30s and by a blockbuster-driven studio system in the 1970s and 80s. In this case, public access cable should also serve as a cautionary example for microcinemas, as funding for both is often in jeopardy.

As long as independent media such as microcinemas represent no more than an alternative to mainstream media, they will remain marginal by definition. In order to make good on the promise of increased media democracy, producers of microcinema must, like the producers of public access cable before them, work to introduce a new media logic that no longer relegates independent media to a powerless periphery.

The author, playing the character of Lars Lautain in his microcinema debut, L’Auteur.
Microcinema’s struggle is against a system of communication where content is controlled from a central point, and “[n]o amount of rhetoric will exorcise this effect,” observe Carey and Quirk, who suggest instead that this bias toward the center “can be controlled only by politics.”

This, I believe, is what microcinema has done and must continue to do to effect a democratization of the media: microcinema must reframe the scale on which this democratization takes place by seeking out the polis at the root of “politics,” the local community where emergent voices can reach an audience that will want to listen and, when called upon to do so, act accordingly.

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NOTES

1Sherman Alexie, “Declaration of Independents,” Utne, May-June 2003, 79. To be fair, Alexie is well aware of the short-sightedness of the assumptions underlying this narrative and is keen to draw them into question himself.
6 Broderick, 68.
8 Patricia R. Zimmerman, Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xii.
16 Qtd. in Jenkins, 97.
17 Richard Edwards, “Digital Activism in the Independent Media Center Movement,” Spectator 21, no. 2 (2001): 84. Technological determinism underlies these discourses to varying degrees, of course, playing a greater role in Coppola’s observation, for instance, than in Quart’s.
19 Halleck, 7.
20 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, qtd. in Halleck, 147.
21 Halleck 94, 117-122, 156-164.
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23 Which is not to say that cost has disappeared as an issue altogether. Kyle Keyser, whose low-budget documentary shot on digital video had its premiere at the 2003 Atlanta Film Festival, explains: the $4,000 he spent for his camera was “expensive to me, but in the world of filmmaking it’s damn cheap.” Qtd. in Bob Longino, “27th Annual Atlanta Film Festival: Easy Shot,” Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 1 June 2003.
29 Walker, 64-65.
30 Walker, 64.
31 Lagos, ch. 2.
32 Kenner, 218.
33 Kino homepage, available at www.kino00.com/historique.html; Bachar and Lagos, 103.
34 Bachar and Lagos, 106.
35 Bachar and Lagos.
37 Alston and Peters, 29; Kenner, 220. In personal e-mails, both Joel Bachar and Patrick Kwiatkowski strongly objected to Honkworm’s classification as a microcinema because of its commercial nature.
38 Microcinema International homepage, available at www.microcinema.com/index/50_about.
40 Kenner, 219.
41 Kenner, 219.
42 Joel Bachar, personal e-mail, 25 Nov. 2003.
45 Ouimet.
46 Qtd. in Ouimet.
47 Rousseau, 68-69.
49 Antero Alli, curator of the Nomad Videofilm Festival, qtd. in Walker, 66.
50 Lagos, ch. 6.
51 Carey and Quirk, 136.