

AN ENDANGERED TRADITION

by Dr. J. Baggaley & S. James

The early Soviets understood the power of film as an educational medium. In the 1920s and 30s, film-makers such as Dziga Vertov and Alexander Medvedkin took their cameras by train to towns and villages across Ukraine and Russia. In each community they filmed the people at work and at play, aiming to capture what Vertov called 'fragments of reality'. Editing their film by night, they would play it back to the people, gathered on the station platform the next day. The people watched themselves, wrote Medvedkin, "in stunned amazement", and were able to see their lives in new detail.

When they played back the film recorded in one village to the people of other villages, the 'film train' pioneers found that the moving image also has the power to unify. In viewing each other's lives, the people were able to recognize that their problems were shared by many others like them. This empowering educational effect did not commend the film train tradition to the Stalinist regime, and in the 1930s the practice was banned. Sixty years later, the tradition has been revived in respectful detail by the 1995 Canada-Ukraine AIDS education project.

The Canadian members of the 1995 project team included a 3-person video crew, which recorded and played back the members of each community both to themselves and to others like them. Whereas 60 years ago the vital process of video feedback would take 12 hours, today it is immediate, and in the 1995 project was further enhanced by the use of computer-based 'response analysis' techniques. The project team observed the same powerful effects noted by Vertov and Medvedkin over 60 years ago, and is convinced that the 'film train' is a vital and cost-effective means of community education for the 1990s.

The film train technique preserves a vital educational ingredient not featured in other forms of mass media education: the ability to design educational programs for each community's specific needs. It allows the people to be a vital part of the educational activity, and effectively puts them 'in the picture'. The approach carries insights which North American mass media educators are only just beginning to gain after finding that other techniques have failed. (The authors' full history of this tradition is shortly to be published.)

However, the future of this time-honoured educational approach hangs in the balance. This time last year, six community trains were used to carry educational and cultural programs throughout Ukraine. Today, owing to the mounting costs of running them, only one of these trains is still in use. It is vital that funds are found to maintain this highly advanced form of national education, and to continue the present project, while there is still time to preserve the sound educational work conducted by organizations such as the President's National Anti-AIDS Committee in Ukraine to date.



The educational train getting ready to roll.

urgency regarding the importance of AIDS prevention in their communities. Questions aimed at the students of 15 years and upwards revealed sensible attitudes to the prevention of HIV infection in their sexual conduct, and a more compassionate understanding of the problems of persons with AIDS than is typical of comparable communities in other countries. But this high level of AIDS awareness will need to be carefully sustained across Ukraine in the months and years ahead. The information gathered in Kyiv and Volynsk is currently being used in the production of print and video materials for use in Ukraine's future AIDS education work.

CONCLUSIONS

The community-oriented approach to national AIDS education being taken in Ukraine is based on insights and expertise dating back over 75 years.

In North America and other parts of the world, the importance of a community-based approach to health education has been eclipsed by the emphasis on elaborate national media strategies involving massive costs but achieving little public impact. International health educators can learn much from the approaches currently adopted in Ukraine, combining teaching and research, information and entertainment in a manner as modern today as it was 75 years ago.

It is hoped that the current project forms a model for continued Canada-Ukraine collaboration in the years ahead; and this possibility will be discussed during a visit by members of the President's Anti-AIDS Committee (Dr. Valery Iwasiuk, Dr. Renard Vasilinets, and Volodymyr Tarasenko) to Canada in May-June 1995.

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For further details about this project, and for information about the project's educational video and print materials, please contact the authors at: 1 Salisbury Rd., Pointe Claire, Quebec H9S 3Y9.