



Making Your Documentary Matter: Public Engagement Strategies that Work

January 31 - February 1, 2007

A project of the Center for Social Media in the School of
Communication at American University

Funded by the Ford Foundation and the Surdna Foundation

Rapporteur's Report

By Kate Schuler

Introduction:

More than 200 representatives of non-profit organizations, media producers, and funders participated in the two-day conference "Making Your Documentary Matter: Public Engagement Strategies that Work," sponsored by the American University School of Communications Center for Social Media. The Center's third annual conference was held January 31 and February 1, 2007 and featured leaders and innovators from non-profits and media speaking about new ideas and best practices to make documentaries for social impact and public engagement.

The trend in social media outreach efforts has been for closer collaboration between media producers and non-profits. As technology evolves to create more platforms for distribution, it's hard for non-profits and independent filmmakers to be heard above the din. But with broader partnerships and an acknowledgement of the need for flexibility, many media producers and non-profits are finding they can navigate the new terrain with an agility that allows them to spread their message to wider, and more diverse, audiences than ever before.

Conference participants agreed that media producers and non-profits have to partner early on in the production process in order for a film to have the broadest social impact. Working together from the beginning allows filmmakers to tailor their films to highlight the specific issues of concern to their partners. While this close relationship can sometimes cause tension and require compromise on a filmmaker's artistic vision, media producers have to understand the integral role that non-profits now play in distribution. At the same time, non-profit organizations must increasingly work with broader coalitions in the production of a film and join together on outreach efforts.

Advances in technology and wider availability of broadband offer both challenges and opportunities for non-profits and media producers. Panelists emphasized the need for flexibility in order to make the best use of various outlets such as youtube.com, iTunes, and cell phones. Producers should be ready to repurpose their media into shorter clips and reconfigure it for different audiences.

As non-profits and producers grapple with these technologies as delivery systems, they should also think about how to leverage them to add value to their media projects. Panelists discussed the use of video cell phones and smaller video cameras that allow people to tell their own stories. This audience participation has the potential to both enhance the overarching media project and create communities during the production itself.

Keynote

Robert Greenwald, who pioneered alternate forms of distribution by bringing an organizer's sensibility to film distribution, introduced the theme of the conference by discussing the necessity of film producers partnering early on with non-profit organizations to make a film that both matters and is seen by many people.

Greenwald's films, which include *Uncovered*, *Outfoxed*, and *Iraq for Sale*, have been effective because of his partnerships with such organizations as the Center for American Progress and MoveOn.org, which have large mailing lists and experience in online outreach.

The individuals and groups who distributed and screened the films were the critical component in creating social change. But non-profit partners are not simply distributors. Partnerships and coalitions must be formed early, before any footage is shot. It is the responsibility of producers, he said, to ask non-profits how a film can help their cause and go from there. Outreach strategies and goals should be coordinated alongside the filmmaking process, with input from non-profits at every step of the way. Beyond organizational partnerships, involving individuals in the productions and screenings also works to build community while affecting social change.

Greenwald acknowledged that such a working relationship presents challenges, including competing goals of various groups and bureaucracies within organizations. But he also has seen disparate groups come together while working on a film and he believes this kind of cooperation will be more common in the future. He also noted that some partnerships open him up to criticism as some viewers see potential biases.

Greenwald also made an argument - which he conceded could be unpopular -- that producers must choose between shooting a film intended to win theatrical release and Oscar nominations, and creating a documentary to spur social change. By partnering with organizations, producers will be required to make very different decisions than if they are targeting the festival circuit.

Ultimately, he said, partnering with organizations and implementing alternative methods of distribution has brought his films a much broader audience than if he had entered them in festivals or attempted distribution in theaters. He pointed to *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, which screened at 1000 churches the week it was released, as an example of how working through communities can result in broader reach for a film.

Mobile Media for Public Life

As mobile phone become widespread, even leapfrogging landlines in some countries, they are quickly becoming the “fourth screen” for viewing content (in addition to movies, TV, and computers). Panelists discussed the potential for cell phones as a content delivery tool, but also the possibility that cell phones create for more or a two-way conversation about short videos. Audience members were also urged to think about how cell phones can enhance documentary projects by broadening the idea of how media is produced and who can create content.

Sarah DeWitt of PBS Kids described public television’s foray into digital distribution of educational programs through handheld device. PBS, with a grant from the Department of Education, conducted a study to see if cell phones could be used effectively as a way to deliver educational content to lower-income 3- and 4-year-olds. PBS distributed cell phones and trained parents on use of the phone and how to help teach literacy skills. For 26 days, content featuring a different letter of the alphabet was sent to the phones, with Elmo giving an introduction to each letter for the children. Three-quarters of the parents said it could be an effective learning tool, and three-quarters of parents below the poverty line said it improved their child’s knowledge to a good or great extent. Problems, however, arose in load time of the content onto the cell phone, drained batteries, and in parents reporting that PBS should use more varied characters and content.

Sundance has also come to view cell phones as a dynamic new way to distribute short films. As part of a pilot project Sundance has commissioned five filmmakers to make 3 to 5 minute short films for the mobile phone platform to be downloaded by the public. Rahdi Taylor of the Sundance Institute, raised the possibility that not only could cell phones become a powerful way for people to consume media, but could evolve into a two-way communication tool. She noted that cell phones are a very intimate form of media, a characteristic that could increase the sense of social connection with content producers and other users. Because of the evolving ways for viewers to see films, Taylor also urged filmmakers to envision their productions as multi-modal and multi-platform and create content that can be repurposed for various formats.

Benjamin Walker emphasizes the interplay of cell phones and the internet, the “3rd and 4th screens,” with the *American Experience* project about Native Americans called *We Shall Remain*. He urged audience members to think of cell phones not just as a way to deliver content, but also as a way to enhance broader multimedia projects. *We Shall Remain* has recruited 200 people from around the country and will give them video cell phones (that include basic editing capabilities) and ask them to record short films about their lives. The films will then be shared on the project’s website, primarily by linking them to a google map to enhance the sense of place in the videos. Additionally, participants will be able to share videos with each other by sending them over the phone.

The use of cell phones for both content delivery and content production is still in its infancy, and panelists represented the “bleeding edge” of experiment, where financial viability isn’t even at issue. All stressed the challenges of working at a moment before there is industry consensus on standards, or common video platforms for cell phones. Cell phones present a

unique opportunity for new ways of distribution, but also open the door for more of a back-and-forth between media creators and viewers. Panelists also expected the role of curators, such as Sundance, to change and evolve as people pass along content they like on their mobile devices and viral campaigns continue to grow.

Non-profit Media on the Cutting Edge

Non-profits have begun to explore ways to make effective use of digital media and have begun to learn how to tailor their media for various platforms. Panelists emphasized the need for organizations to be nimble with their films in order to repurpose them for diverse audiences and delivery systems to have the biggest impact.

Matthew Nisbet, a professor at American University's School of Communication who researches the impact of strategic communication, addressed the question of how audiences watch documentaries and how organizations can increase the impact of films. Nisbet noted that Americans are increasingly able to tailor their news and media to their own specific interests, but suggests that community forums and screenings can have some success in bypassing this self-selectivity. Another effective tool in expanding the reach of a documentary is to target opinion leaders in a community and citizen groups who will raise the issues in informal discussions. He also suggests that sometimes movies can drive the press's coverage of an issue - such as the press interest in conflict diamonds after the release of *Blood Diamonds* - and that organizations be aware of this to use it to their advantage.

Marissa Brown of the Alliance for Justice discussed her organization's campaign to expose "the right's agenda on the law and tactics they are using" in regards to court appointments. Aimed at a progressive audience, the Alliance for Justice created a 22-minute film about conservatives and the courts and set up screenings at law school campuses, house parties, and on the Hill. They broke the film into parts and downloaded it onto youtube, emailed it to activists, asked partner organizations to show it to their members and mailed out 10,000 DVDs. Alliance for Justice also counter-intuitively used right-wing blogs and a screening at the American Constitution Society to generate buzz. The best lessons from the campaign: make a shorter clip of the film to show online and partner with others to drive the distribution.

The Sierra Club has been particularly focused on extending the impact of the films by using their productions to drive traffic to their website, which had specific information about how viewers could get involved. Adrienne Bramhall, Sierra Club productions, has tried to use *Sierra Club Chronicles* to build bridges and highlight partnerships that show the environment is neither a red nor blue cause. Broadcast on LinkTV, the productions were promoted through Sierra Club partners, who got the word out about programming and airdates.

Michael Hoffman of See3 Communications, which helps non-profits use film and media effectively, also emphasized the imperative of repurposing media for multiple platforms and audiences. He also cautioned non-profits to be realistic about the numbers of people who will view online video. Because sites such as youtube.com carry such large numbers of videos without efficient indexing, See3 is setting up dogooder.tv, a website devoted to the films and videos of non-profits.

Non-profit organizations need to think about their use of film and video constantly, documenting their activities and partnering with other groups to distribute their films. They

must also, panelists agreed, be flexible with their content and be ready to package it in different ways to get the biggest impact in distribution and viewership.

Participatory Media

Filmmakers and non-profits have had great success in turning their audience into co-producers of documentaries. Panelists discussed the effect of involving viewers in all aspects of production and outreach - a process that not only helps the filmmakers and organizations, but also brings together communities.

WITNESS, an organization founded 15 years ago to give people the opportunity to use visual media to affect human rights issues, has partnerships with groups around the world that create documentaries intended to have a catalyzing role in their communities. Gillian Caldwell, executive director, explained the organization provides equipment and training to partners that apply with proposals for documentaries that have the potential for the greatest impact, what she called a "tipping point moment," such as documenting human rights abuses that can be used as evidence. Additionally, the organization works with human rights organizations to teach them how to effectively use media, and have set up a "hub" on their website where groups can upload videos.

The Service Employees International Union, SEIU, relies heavily on member-created videos to create unity among workers. Michelle Miller, a senior producer at SEIU, explained that the documentaries are also effective lobbying tools, but that they are most effective in building solidarity among members of the union. As an example, she told of how the union showed digital stories made by six immigrant members in an SEIU workshop, to show the experiences of immigrants at a meeting where members were to vote on immigration reform. Many members had been resistant to the idea of immigration reform. Playing the videos throughout the day convinced many of the delegates to change their minds. At the same time, she noted, the digital divide has prevented many of the groups members from seeing their work, so they play the videos at meetings and community screenings and try to release the documentaries in as many formats as possible.

Miller explained that SEIU's experience shows how individuals can be the best ambassadors for their own causes and that putting media production in their hands offers them a powerful tool. But, she cautioned that as non-profits embark on these types of projects, it is imperative to have effective facilitators to help with technology and create a safe space for people to open up with their stories.

Jesikah Maria Ross, an activist and filmmaker, has also success using "digital stories" to help members of a community connect and understand one another. The project *Saving the Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action*, aims to reach across cultural and class divides to unite members of a community to work to preserve a way of life in the Sierras. With the project, she has used three tactics: start with outreach and social engagement before production begins, hold community listening sessions, and use public media to air a radio series.

In Canada, a group of pregnant teenage girls has been working with filmmaker Katerina Cizek, to record their stories online in a project called *Young Parents, No Fixed Address*. Cizek says that the process of creating this media has helped the young women, but has also provided a tool for them to use when they lobby the mayor for more services. Giving them space online,

Cizek says, also gives them a way to tell their story without having to relive it over and over for each new audience.

To reach even bigger audiences, Jean Seok of Arts Engine, suggests non-profits “stand on the shoulders of giants.” By relinquishing control of a video and allowing it onto sites such as youtube.com, iTunes, Google Video, and others, organizations can get more bandwidth and a larger audience. Arts Engine also helps organizations with concrete ideas for using media in outreach and sponsors the Media that Matters Film Festival.

Putting more of the production in the hands of individuals, an audience member noted, can have a profound impact on quality and production values. Panelists acknowledged this and noted that the more compelling the story, the more viewers are willing to overlook production values. Miller noted that aesthetics do matter when trying to get your message taken seriously, so SEIU combines member-produced video in professionally created packages. And Jessika Maria Ross noted that in more traditional media outlets such as NPR and PBS, high production values are essential.

As non-profit organizations increasingly turn to their members as content creators, panelists emphasized that the act of producing itself becomes an organizing and community-building tool. Focusing on personal stories of individuals goes far to build bridges and create understanding and has enormous potential to bring about change.

Bridging Difference, Building Engagement

Filmmakers and non-profits have to continue to evolve in their thinking about how to best engage audiences as technology continues to alter the landscape. Non-traditional venues and distributions methods are becoming the norm, so non-profits need to continually reevaluate how they are reaching their target audiences and getting their message out and how they work with filmmakers. Moderator Robert West of Working Films, suggested that the question for filmmakers now is, “How can my film help your movement, no how can your movement help my film?”

Joy Thomas Moore of the Annie E. Casey Foundation suggested that outreach efforts are bolstered by allying with unlikely partners and build as many relationships as possible since you never know who will become a champion for the cause. She also emphasized the effectiveness of documentaries in creating change. She pointed to legislative victories resulting from the film about foster care children “Aging Out” and public service announcements in Providence, which swayed a referendum on giving ex-convicts the right to vote.

From the documentary filmmaker’s perspective, panelist Aishah Shahidah Simmons discussed the difficulties of fundraising and how she discovered that the process of raising money through speaking engagements about her film actually helped spread her message as well. In addition, showing rough cuts of the film, NO! The Rape Documentary initiated dialogues among women that otherwise may not have occurred.

Deciding how best to use films for policy change requires unique approaches for each film. Ellen Schneider, executive director of Active Voice, pointed to an example of when a filmmaker met early on with researchers from the Brookings Institution to discuss her film and

the researchers got so excited about the project that they offered her their latest research. That kind of synergy - where the filmmaker built up an audience and generated buzz while the audience in turn actively helped improve her documentary - is an example of why it is important to engage partners early and think about several different approaches to get the message out about a project.

Even more traditional outlets such as ITVS have begun to change the definition of "documentary film." Dennis Palmieri, director of communications, pointed out that the film or television program is no longer the centerpiece of an outreach or educational campaign. Instead, Palmieri says the issues should take center stage. By considering the issues instead of the content of a finished film, producers can more broadly consider their audience and tailor supplemental materials to reach as wide an audience as possible. This approach can often require filmmakers to make changes in the video content and demands flexibility from producers as the campaign evolves. As an example, Palmieri cited the film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes*. The film, a 54 minute documentary that examines hip hop music with attention to the themes of masculinity, violence, and media literacy, has been edited, excerpted, and customized many different ways in order to tailor the content to educational campaigns about the different themes and to different age groups. Traditionally, Palmieri noted, ITVS put the film at the center of its outreach activities. Now, ITVS conceives of its publicity, promotion and outreach work synthetically, with content—not the film, but core content of which the film is one piece—at the core of its efforts. Filmmakers need to work with ITVS to produce work that flexibly can connect with publics in face-to-face, online, television and small-screen environments; that content needs to be appropriate to the environment.

Conclusion

Non-profits and media producers can no longer adhere to traditional ideas about documentaries and outreach. Filmmakers and social change organizations must work more closely together than ever before to ensure media will be effective and find broad distribution. This requires flexibility on the part of filmmakers and a willingness to form broad partnerships on the part of non-profits. At the same time, producers and non-profits can use technology to engage their audience and members in the production itself -- an innovation that allows for a richer product and strengthens communities in the process. While non-profits and media producers have found success at outreach using alternate distribution methods, the landscape is constantly changing and they will continue to experiment and work to find the most effective ways to leverage new technologies to increase the impact of social media.