



## Center for Social Media

### **Bridging Cultural Divides Through Public Media Projects—*The War Tapes* Puts a Face on War**

By Katja Wittke, Research Fellow, American University

#### **Project**

*The War Tapes* (2006, 97 minutes)

A film by Deborah Scranton

deborah@thewartapes.com

#### **Summary**

*The War Tapes* is an independent, participatory film project. The process involved members of a New Hampshire National Guard unit filming their experiences in Iraq. They used new media technology while filming and shipped the tapes back to the producers through military channels. The final film is the product of a collaborative production process and combined several perspectives: those of soldiers who see themselves as warriors, of National Guard officials, of liberal funders and producers, and of professional filmmakers. The film distributors also utilized new media technologies for promotion and outreach, such as blogging sites to create buzz and an online social network site which allowed people to sign up for screening locations. Blogs, especially those on *The War Tapes* Web site, also served as a tool to continue the storytelling that was started in the film.

While not produced for broadcast on traditional public media stations, *The War Tapes* represents an innovative experiment in engaging multiple publics and informing them about issues of grave policy concern. The research reveals three main points: First, traditional media distribution has garnered only a small audience for this kind of film. Second, viral networking is a powerful distribution mechanism that can make an end run around mass media distribution; it can appeal directly to targeted publics, to people watching and acting because they perceive that they have a common problem. And third, Iraq documentaries fuel an ongoing conversation that cuts across boundaries of generations and geography, engaging publics that include members of the military and their families, as well as broader publics of filmgoers and political activists.

This case study is part of a larger project by the Center for Social Media titled Mapping Public Media (<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/mpm>). The project highlights innovative public media projects—defined by the center as media that engage publics to communicate about and act upon shared issues—and compares different methods for mapping the resources, circuits of circulation, and connections that sustain the public media field.

#### **Production Companies**

Scranton/Lacy Films

SenArt Films  
133 West Broadway, Fifth Floor  
New York, NY 10013  
Phone: 212-406-9610  
Fax: 212-406-9581  
Email: info@senartfilms.com

**Producers/Directors**

Deborah Scranton, Director  
Chuck Lacy, Executive Producer  
Robert May, Executive Producer  
Steve James, Producer/Editor

**Primary platform**

Independent film

**Other Platforms/Formats**

DVD, TV, blogging/content management system

**Funders**

Chuck Lacy and private funders

**Awards/Festivals**

Best Documentary Feature, Academy Awards 2006 (Short List)  
Best International Documentary, Britdoc Festival 2006 (winner)  
Best Documentary, Tribeca Film Festival 2006 (winner)

**Outreach/Strategic Design**

Scranton-Lacy Films  
SenArt Films

**Distributors**

**Institutional:**

SenArt Films, Anastasia Kousakis  
akousakis@senartfilms.com

**Theatrical:**

Jeff Lipsky  
jeff@lipsky.net

**DVD Preview Edition:**

www.Thewaretapes.com  
or contact Docurama  
New Video  
P.O. Box 2284  
South Burlington, VT 05407-9345  
www.docurama.com

## **Timeline**

### **2004**

February Major Greg Heilshorn, the public affairs officer of the New Hampshire National Guard, contacted filmmaker Scranton asking her to go to Iraq as an embedded filmmaker.

Scranton developed the production idea of having soldiers film their experiences and directing them via internet technology.

Scranton secured initial funding through Chuck Lacy and producer Robert May

Scranton proposed her idea to the 180 soldiers of Charlie Company of the New Hampshire National Guard. Several accepted.

March Filming of 900 hours by National Guard soldiers in Iraq begins.

November Steve James got involved, filming 200 hours of additional home footage and editing material.

### **2005**

February Filming by National Guard soldiers in Iraq ends.

### **2006**

April World Premiere, Tribeca Film Festival, New York

June Theatrical release, New York

June-Nov. Film was shown in about 98 arthouse theatres, at more than 12 festivals and in several private screenings at organizations and institutions.

November DVD Preview Edition online release

### **2007**

April Broadcast  
DVD Directors' Cut release in stores

## **Background**

*The War Tapes* documents the experience of war through digital cameras carried by soldiers of one New Hampshire National Guard unit (Charlie Company, 3rd of the 172nd Infantry Regiment) during their deployment in Iraq from spring 2004 to spring 2005. The film was the feature film directorial debut of Deborah Scranton, an experienced journalist and New Hampshire native.

The project started in February 2004, when Major Greg Heilshorn, the public affairs officer of the New Hampshire National Guard and a former journalist himself, offered Scranton the opportunity to go to Iraq as an embedded filmmaker. He had met Scranton on a previous project, a documentary about World War II veterans, *Stories from Silences, Witness to War*. She mentioned that she would be interested in doing another project at some point with the National Guard. So, once the New Hampshire National Guard started their rotation of deployment to Iraq, Heilshorn and Scranton started to talk about ideas for how to cover the units. But instead of going to Iraq as an embedded filmmaker, Scranton had the idea to give the cameras directly to the soldiers and direct them from abroad.

The filmmakers' concept for *The War Tapes* was to tell very organically what it means to go to war. The goal was to make a film that was true to the experience of the soldiers and that included the unhappiness of being there, the soldiers' questioning why they were there, and their concerns about whether they would be coming home or whether what they were fighting for was worth it. The filmmakers hoped that the film would speak to a broader constituency than some of the other films that had come out on the war in Iraq (See "Competition" section, below)

During the editing process, the key creative team frequently discussed how to fulfill their goal to make a film that would not appeal only to anti-war or pro-war viewers. They wanted to make a film that was political in the fullest sense, i.e., wherever an audience member was on the political spectrum, there should be things in the film that would surprise or make them think about where they stood. They took this very seriously because for them that was the most honest, forthright, and organic way to produce the film. It would have been very easy for them to take the footage and manipulate it into a very strident anti-war statement, but instead, they strove to present the soldiers and their experiences in as honest and unfiltered a manner as possible.

For the National Guard, this project was a unique, original way to educate the public about who they are and what they do. They wanted to show that citizen soldiers have different personal and political views and opinions, but they all volunteer to serve in Iraq and are proud of what they are doing. In this way, the National Guard also wanted to contribute to the national dialogue about the role of the soldiers in Iraq. This made their intentions very compatible with the filmmakers' goals.

## **Production**

### **Initial Approach**

Major Greg Heilshorn, the public affairs officer, first contacted Scranton on February 12, 2004, with the offer to embed as a filmmaker. Scranton replied by asking if she could give cameras to the soldiers instead. Shortly after, with National Guard permission, Scranton proposed the idea to the 180 soldiers of Charlie Company of the New Hampshire National Guard at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Initially, the soldiers questioned her motives but were convinced by her drive to have them tell their story in a collaborative project. And so, ten soldiers volunteered, five of whom filmed throughout their one-year tour of duty. In the end, *The War Tapes* was told through the eyes of three soldiers: Sergeant Zack Bazzi, Sergeant Steve Pink and Specialist Mike Moriarty. Additional filming by Sergeant Duncan Domey and Specialist Brandon Wilkins rounded out the coverage.

In her directing, Scranton used a multi-camera platform, an approach she took from her sports reporting background, in which larger sports events were covered by different cameras and from several angles. Throughout the year of production (March 2004 to February 2005), the soldiers

filmed 900 hours of footage. They were equipped with inexpensive video cameras that they mounted on dashboards, gun turrets, and even helmets to capture the unit's 1,200 combat operations and 250 direct enemy engagements. They also filmed interviews and performed self-interviews. Via instant messaging (IM) and e-mail, the soldiers were in contact with Scranton, exchanging experiences and getting support.

It took the soldiers' tapes two weeks to reach New Hampshire through the military chain of command. The tapes were handed over by the soldiers to the company commander in Iraq, shipped to the public affairs officer, and then handed over to Scranton. (In a few cases, pictures may have been directly uploaded but none of the raw film.) Back home, the filmmaking team shot an additional 200 hours of tape documenting the impact on the families during the deployment, as well as after the soldiers' return home.

The three soldiers through whose eyes the film was told have different backgrounds and life stories. Sergeant Steve Pink is a young carpenter who also worked as a journalist; with a dark, irreverent sense of humor, he had joined the National Guard for college money. Sergeant Zack Bazzi is an inquisitive, ironic traveler who was born in Lebanon. He was a University of New Hampshire student studying international affairs and psychology. Specialist Mike Moriarty worked as a mechanic and is a husband and the father of two, driven to fight by honor and redemption.

On March 14, 2004, the unit was deployed to Iraq and based at Logistic Support Area (LSA) Anaconda in the deadly Sunni Triangle, where they were under constant threat of ambush and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) attacks. The unit traveled 1.4 million miles during their tour, and lived through over 1,200 combat operations and 250 direct enemy engagements. The filming soldiers contributed in varying degrees to the more than 900 hours of footage that was filmed in the 11 months they were deployed in Iraq.

The soldiers were for the most part autonomous in terms of what and when to film in Iraq. Scranton's role was to prompt them to share on tape what they wanted to share and not to prompt them what specifically to shoot. As a rule, the soldiers never let the filming interfere with their ability to be a soldier in a conflict.

Moriarty alone provided almost half of the footage, shooting about 220 tapes— more than four times than other soldiers. In a way, filming became a way for him to frame his war experience, something he enjoyed and needed for very personal reasons. He and another soldier, who was not featured in the film, were in much more regular contact with Scranton than the other soldiers. Steve Pink, who was a journalist, interviewed a lot of other soldiers but did only one or two self-interviews. However, he recorded his experiences in writing and agreed to read from his journals.

Throughout the project, Scranton was much focused on creating and maintaining an open relationship with the soldiers in order to lend the film the greatest possible authenticity. She had varied degrees of contact with the soldiers due to varying interest on their parts in the filming process, in using e-mail and IM or in new technology in general. Within those communications, Scranton was always very encouraging about the process and served as a voice back home.

## Assembling the Production Team

To make the film, Scranton teamed up with Chuck Lacy, the president of the venture capital fund Barred Rock Fund, a former president of Ben and Jerry's, whom she met at a writing class at Dartmouth College. Lacy provided the initial funding, and as executive producer, was also a key figure in acquiring additional funds for the film. Scranton and Lacy brought the idea to Robert May at the Sundance Producers Conference. May agreed to produce the film under his SenArt Films banner and convinced Steve James (producer, director, and editor of *Hoop Dreams*), with whom he worked on *Stevie*, to coproduce and edit *The War Tapes*. James brought Leslie Simmer from Chicago's Kartemquin Films into the mix as the second editor. Kartemquin also lent space for one of *The War Tapes'* two edit suites. Aaron Wickenden served as associate editor and postproduction supervisor, and Adam Singer as co-producer.

Lacy says he was especially motivated by Scranton's project because:

The project idea came at the peak moment of embedded reporting. I felt that embedded reporting seemed more about the reporters, that the reporters were too much the stars. I also felt that reporters were too comfortable in the military units and that the public needed a different point of view. Letting soldiers film their story meant for the audience to be able to get closer to the original experience.

However, putting up money for such a project was also risky because they didn't know if and how the soldiers would do it and if they would be able to film the whole year. Yet, Lacy provided the initial funding and acquired about another dozen other individuals who contributed financially to the film. There was no corporate investment in this film.

Scranton and Lacy also teamed up with May; at SenArt Films he had executive-produced several award-winning documentaries since 2000, including *The Fog of War* and *Stevie*, which was directed by James. May helped with fund raising, getting the right people involved creatively and organizing the distribution and outreach through SenArt. For him, it was extremely important that this film did not make just one political argument; he felt that to interject the political views of the filmmakers would have destroyed the unique opportunity to see what the soldiers saw, and to hear what *they* think.

James got involved in the production and editing of the film in November 2004 when the soldiers were still shooting footage in Iraq. He was largely responsible for the homefront shoots and was the primary editor. The home film team shot another 200 hours of footage, interviewing friends and family while the soldiers were deployed but also after they returned home. While James is a producer with Kartemquin Films, with this project, he was involved independently. Yet, Kartemquin Films rented out equipment, contracted out staff, and was used for private screenings, as well as to solicit feedback from the independent filmmaker community.

*The War Tapes* was the product of many people with different viewpoints and opinions. For James it was a very rich work experience and truly collaborative effort:

Typically, when doing a political film, people are in political alignment with the film, they share the same feelings about the subject so that they are not in constant conflict about what the film is trying to say. What happened in the process of making *The War Tapes* was that the different shades of feelings about the war in Iraq among the creative team in some way

reflected what they were getting from the soldiers—a challenging creative process. At different points of time each of the members of the creative team played their role of keeping everybody else honest about showing what the soldiers were experiencing in Iraq. They acted as checks and balances on each other to make sure that different people’s political agenda regarding the war did not overtake the material itself.

### **Editing**

James realized that his intent to cut a two-hour film out of 1,000 hours of footage in six months was a monumental undertaking, so he invited Leslie Simmer, who had worked with him before, onto the editing team. While working on editing the film, she experienced also being an audience of the film. “Based on my middle-class, college-educated background, I had a very different idea of the people who are serving the country,” she said. “But I was faced with very thoughtful, well-educated individuals who just had a very different idea of what war was about.”

The soldiers were not involved in the editing process and were only brought in to look at one of the final cuts. At that time, Scranton and James talked to them about the editing process and solicited their feedback. All of the soldiers were struck to see how candid and accurate the portrayal was and how the editing team took their material and revealed them, especially in those few scenes that shed a negative light on some soldiers. Some of the soldiers attended screenings of the films and were available for audience questions. They experienced how the immediacy of the film forced the audience to understand what they were going through.

### **Collaboration with the National Guard**

The National Guard, especially Major Heilshorn, had been very committed to telling the soldiers’ story. When the National Guard officials had misgivings at the beginning, and researched the backgrounds of the filmmakers, it helped that Scranton had already been living within the New Hampshire National Guard communities and had previously made a film about the military. So the National Guard took a leap of faith and went with the project.

Once the filming had started and the tapes managed to make their way through the chain of military command, the production team had total editorial freedom. If any concerns were voiced, they came from higher-ranking military leaders with a political agenda. The National Guard did not have editorial control over the film, but Major Heilshorn and New Hampshire National Guard officers had the chance to give their honest assessment and feedback at a screening late in the production process. They had their chance to weigh in, and the creative team took their comments into account when working on the final cut.

As part of the filming process, the National Guard and its commanders had been sensitive mainly to two key areas. First, they didn’t want any footage that could harm national security and second, they were concerned about the “appropriateness” of the material, i.e., filmed incidents that might be regarded as too graphic or brutal. So, there were recurring discussions about whether something added to the story, whether it was necessary. But there was only one incident when footage of a killed insurgent was confiscated because it was deemed inappropriate. This incident was dealt with within the film, which makes it an even more powerful moment.

Major Valas, the commander of Charlie Company, realized the potential of the documentary as a vehicle to tell an important story and honor the soldiers in his unit as well as their families, and he very much supported the project. He was also one of the first soldiers to volunteer to carry a camera at Fort Dix, but when operations began in Iraq, he chose not to film. On at least two occasions he intervened when other soldiers from different commands in Iraq confiscated the cameras and reported the filming to their officers.

### **Strategic Outreach**

The distribution and outreach strategy followed a standard pattern for documentaries: first, theatre and festival screenings, then a DVD release, followed by broadcast. The film's distribution was supported by an outreach campaign using the Internet and targeting certain audience segments. May's SenArt Films was responsible for publicity contacts, international sales, and distribution. Theatrical sales had been outsourced to Jeff Lipsky, a veteran independent film distributor.

Lacy and May were especially involved with the outreach, trying to set up collaborations and working on using the Internet to create buzz about the film. They specifically targeted two groups: the military community, which they thought would like to see their story told, and those (mostly liberal) people with a political interest in the war. For these reasons, they both teamed up with military organizations, such as Military.Com, the American Legion, the Iraq and Afghan Veterans of America, and solicited the support of liberal groups like MoveOn.org.

### **The Campaign**

The film was released to theatres on June 2, 2006, and within the following six months was shown in 98 cities around the United States, mostly in art house theatres, but also in festivals, at universities, or in other community settings. The local screenings were accompanied by public relations activities that targeted local TV stations and print publications.

Before the theatrical release, the film made its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2006, where it won an award for best documentary feature. This gave the film a vital initial boost, generating national as well as international press coverage. In addition to the Tribeca award, *The War Tapes* was also the winner for best international documentary at the July 2006 Britdoc festival, and was an official selection at the December 2006 Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival. The film also made the short list of the 79th Academy Award nomination for best documentary but then was not nominated.

A DVD with a preview edition was released on *The War Tapes* Web site in November 2006, and the director's cut edition arrived in stores in April 2007. In addition, the affiliated military organizations, mostly Military.com, started to sell the DVD on their own Web sites and with banner ads on other Web sites in November 2006, receiving a 20 percent commission as a fund-raising opportunity.

A TV broadcast on the U.S. Military Channel occurred in April 2007; a European (France, Germany, Great Britain) broadcast followed.

### **Internet Outreach**

The two main goals of the Internet outreach campaign were to provide a platform to continue the storytelling from the film, and to encourage interaction with the film by different audiences. The Web outreach consisted of two main phases until the end of 2006.

In the first phase, from March to June 2006, *The War Tapes* Web site was an interactive blog that was built and launched by Zephyr Teachout, one of the leading consultants for social networking software. There was considerable blogging activity going on at *The War Tapes* site itself, as well as by Deborah Scranton on other external military and political blogs. In this phase, the producers also used a social networking site, Frappr, where interested members of the public could sign up for screenings. This helped producers to decide where to open the film, by tracking geographical interest and seeing where the markets would be.

Although the blogosphere was one of the key communities to which Scranton and the producers wanted to reach out, they changed their Internet strategy in summer 2006. When the theatrical release got wider and the distribution moved more towards DVD release and TV broadcasting, a strategic decision was made to transform *The War Tapes* site into a more conventional, static format.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

The film's creative team hoped that *The War Tapes* would become a bridge to start conversations between the people who know a soldier and the many who don't. Currently, less than 0.5 percent of people in the United States have a family member who is a soldier, compared to 12 percent in the era of World War II. With that, war becomes a political abstraction rather than a personal experience. Both the filmmakers and the National Guard saw *The War Tapes* as a great opportunity to reach a wide audience and to get to a part of the public that doesn't know a lot about "their Guard."

As of March 2007, the outreach campaign for *The War Tapes* hadn't finished yet; conclusions about the audience impact can only be preliminary. So far, *The War Tapes* has resonated with different audience segments, including policymakers, the art house theatre audience, anti- and pro-war activists, movie makers, military personnel, and the media.

### **Targeting Broad and Specific Publics**

The decision to distribute the film mainly in art house theatres for one week in one city at a time prevented the film from rising to a topic of national debate as was initially the filmmakers' vision. Internet buzz and word-of-mouth did not have enough time to build up local public awareness about the film as it was showing in the individual cities.

In addition, the filmmakers had to counter external audience effects, which also prevented a wider audience from going to see the film. First, the general public seemed to be war-weary with the daily news coverage and the release of more than ten Iraq documentaries within the previous two years. Most of these films received rave reviews, won festival awards and were recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Art and Sciences but lacked significant audience response. Second, the public preconception that documentaries are learning opportunities, often with a political slant, rather than moving personal experiences might have prevented certain audiences from going to see a war documentary.

For people who had the chance to see the film, the producers believe that *The War Tapes* made its point successfully. The audiences in art house theatres, festivals, and special screenings were moved, educated, or even changed. The quiet after the screenings showed that people were trying to digest the experience. *The War Tapes* was the kind of documentary that make people think and talk about it

for many days after seeing it, because it is very raw and “in your face.” The filmmakers witnessed this effect at each of the Q&A sessions after their screenings.

Scranton recounts especially one audience encounter that occurred at the Tribeca premiere. One audience member asked what they could do to help soldiers. Brandon Wilkins, who filmed the opening footage in Fallujah but doesn't appear onscreen, took the question. “He's a man of few words,” says Scranton about the Maine native. “I'm a northern New Englander, too. And we joke that my grandfather had 80 words a day and he used them judiciously.” Wilkins, just as thrifty, said, “Get to know one.”

“We were out later that night,” Scranton says. “I said, ‘Brandon you summed up my film in four words. That's what I was hoping to achieve through the power of empathy.’”

In this respect, the film provided a platform for discussion across cultural divides, because it forced civilian audience members to confront a very different reality than the one they are used to.

#### *Reaching out to Political Publics*

One important target group consisted of those mostly conservative people who are, in general, supportive of American soldiers and therefore feel that they also have to support the war. The film was intended to show those people that this conclusion is not necessarily the right one. *The War Tapes* demonstrated that soldiers had a variety of reasons for choosing to join the military and to serve in Iraq. In addition, it also showed that most of the soldiers were trying to figure out the meaning of that war and the reasons they had been sent to Iraq—just as the rest of the American public should do.

Yet, the greater conservative audience may have assumed that *The War Tapes* was an anti-war film, keeping them away from the theatrical screenings. In addition, art house theatres located in major urban areas are generally not the place where members of a more conservative audience would go to see a movie about Iraq. Instead, they will be targeted with the DVD sales and TV broadcast on the *Military Channel*, a cable channel run by Discovery.

The second political target group consisted of progressive people who generally don't support the idea of war as a political solution and therefore can't relate to soldiers. The film's main goal in regard to this public was to show that soldiers were in Iraq for very honorable reasons and that there is a distinction between civilian politicians and military leadership. Only that the part of this public that goes to art house theatres and follows film critics has been reached with this movie.

One blog entry on [www.thewartapes.com](http://www.thewartapes.com) exemplifies this “cross-over” effect of the film—although in a slanted way:

This war will have both sides of the story told. Thanks to fine young patriots like these 3. The MSM no longer has a monopoly to tell a one-sided, biased, undermine-the-war-effort message.

Posted by: Vern Messer | August 12, 2006 08:07 AM

### *Reaching Internet-Savvy Publics*

The Web site [www.thewaretapes.com](http://www.thewaretapes.com) was set up in March 2006; the first entry is dated March, 8, 2006. The initial *War Tapes* Web site served as a forum for the soldiers' reactions and reached out to fellow soldiers, families, and friends. In summer 2006, the Internet strategy for the film shifted to a more conventional Web site offering, which still included a *War Tapes* blog as an interactive outlet related to clips and theatrical screenings. Blog entries showed active discussion after theatrical screenings and TV appearances of the cast or members of the creative team of the film. Entries that were posted by theatre audiences on the Web site after local screenings ranged from comments on technical aspects of the production, to comments on the personal situation of the soldiers and their families, to requests for additional screenings.

In addition, the internet-savvy audience was actively alerted to the topic in the first few months of the film's distribution phase through postings by the filmmakers and soldiers on other Web sites and blogs. The film's online promotion crossed different lines; it was discussed on milblogger sites, independent film sites, political sites, and citizen journalism sites and mentioned by some leading bloggers, such as diarists on *DailyKos*.

The Internet outreach campaign targeted especially the military bloggers and military online networking sites in order to start a conversation about the movie in the first three to four months of the theatrical release phase. A Technorati search of the exact phrase "the war tapes" on December 4, 2006 revealed that the film was mentioned on 1848 blogs, of which 285 blogs were rated as having "a lot of authority". Restricting the search to the "military" tag resulted in 44 military blog posts about *The War Tapes*, including the top two military blogs, Outside the Beltway and the Mudville Gazette. In addition, the film team successfully scored blog entries with two milbloggers that are very influential in the military community, Andisworld and Blackfive. The team also went to the Milblog Conference in April 2006 to raise awareness about the film.

### *Reaching Military Publics*

In many ways the film was successful in reaching out to the military interest groups. The outreach specifically targeted certain opinion leaders and multipliers. For this reason, the filmmakers teamed up with military organizations such as Military.com, The American Legion, and Iraq and Afghan Veterans of America (IAVA). Apart from organizing private screenings for their membership and supporters, the cooperation partners also promoted the film on their Web sites. As of December 4, 2006, Military.com had about 30 posts on its Web site mentioning *The War Tapes* and [iava.org](http://iava.org) had 16. Military.com also placed banner ads on other military sites to promote *The War Tapes* DVD sales.

The film had touched the military community, along with veterans from previous wars, such as Vietnam veterans. Especially at the special screenings for the military community—which tend to be more conservative than the typical documentary audience—they received tremendously positive feedback. Watching and talking about the film helped not only soldiers from the current war, but also veterans from previous wars and their family to cope with their war experience. One viewer wrote on the blog at [www.thewartapes.com](http://www.thewartapes.com):

I wanted to say thanks for the movie. When I came back it was difficult to answer everyone's questions. It was hard to even understand why I was back and the feelings I was having. For many of us it's difficult to explain ourselves in a way someone who was not there would

understand. This movie allows people to have a small understanding of what we are seeing, feeling and why we are the way we are now...after we have come home.

Posted by: kyle | September 13, 2006 03:56 PM

Considering the interest of the senior National Guard leadership, one might conclude that *The War Tapes* also served as a communication tool and networking outlet for different age groups within the military community. Active soldiers had been especially responsive to the film. Scranton described a soldier who came up to her after a screening and told her that, “I haven’t been able to talk about it. I haven’t known where to begin to explain it. But I’m going to bring all my family and friends to see your movie. And after they see it, I can start to talk.”

The National Guard also used this film to give their own senior leadership, who haven’t been deployed, a bird’s-eye view on what it’s like being deployed in Iraq. The National Guard has not used the film yet for further promotional or educational purposes, except for screenings before the film was finalized to a group of selected Guard members. However, there are plans to use it for educational purposes within the Guard.

## **Measuring the Impact**

### *Geographic Reach*

*The War Tapes* was shown in 98 cities in 40 states in the United States, although mostly for only one week at a time. Only in five cities did it run for two weeks (Concord, New Hampshire; Dennis, Massachusetts; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Scranton, Pennsylvania). In Cambridge, MA and San Francisco it ran for three weeks and in New York repeatedly, in total for four weeks. Although it looked as if the film achieved broad national coverage (it averaged three screenings per state), 45 percent of the screenings were concentrated in only six states: California, Massachusetts (each 11 screenings), New Hampshire, New York (each 8 screenings), Pennsylvania (7 screenings) and Texas (6 screenings.)

### *Commercial Viability*

The film grossed \$254,190 after 20 weeks in commercial release, making it the 22nd most viewed political documentary in the United States in the last 25 years.

### *Reaction of Critics and the Media*

Movie critics loved the film: with 98 percent on the “critics tomatometer” the film got great ratings at the Web site Rotten Tomatoes, which aggregates film reviews. Local media outlets closely followed the local screenings by either announcing them or interviewing cast or production members who happened to be in town for the screenings. Local media showed special interest in cities where a local angle could be attached to the topic, such as in the hometowns of the filming soldiers, of the producers, or the director. Interest was shown by both local TV stations and local newspapers. Local radio shows seldom picked up the topic.

The national and some international media mainly covered *The War Tapes* after the Tribeca film festival and in the first few weeks of its release, as well after the announcement of the Academy Awards short list.

A detailed analysis of the media coverage during the first 8 months after the film’s release can be found in Appendix III.

## Competition

*The War Tapes* was part of a growing body of Iraq war documentaries that were produced within the last three years and that aim to make an impact on the national political debate. Apart from *The War Tapes*, these were, in 2006, Zeitgeist Films' *My Country, My Country*; Focus Features' *The Ground Truth*; Brave New Films' *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* and the Sundance Film Festival award-winner *Iraq in Fragments*, a Typecast Releasing/HBO Documentary Films picture. *The War Tapes*, *My Country, My Country* and *Iraq in Fragments* were nominated for the 2006 Academy Awards in the Documentary Feature category.

While mere war footage isn't an easy sell to already desensitized audiences, these Iraq documentaries offer more intimate views of war, as they are telling stories of particular soldiers or Iraq civilians. *The Ground Truth* tells the stories of Iraq war veterans. Both *Iraq in Fragments* and *My Country, My Country* reveal the Iraqi perspective under U.S. occupation and *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* shows the human cost of using corporations in Iraq to do the jobs formerly handled by government agencies. However, these approaches were not distinct or compelling enough for the Iraq documentaries to be economically successful.

If one examines the 10 most watched documentaries ever released in America (such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *March of the Penguins*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and *Madonna: Truth or Dare*) they have at least two of the following in common: a celebrity or controversial public figure as the main figure in the film, animals, or the backing of a major publicity campaign that spent millions of dollars pushing those movies to the masses. But the Iraq docs were receiving no such boosts.

A comparison made in December 2006 that analyzed seven Iraq war documentaries (See Appendix IV) showed that *The War Tapes* did indeed create the most buzz in the blogosphere in the first eight months after its release and was the commercially most successful to-date—although *Iraq in Fragments* seems to be able to top that, because it seemed to be the critics' favorite, winning the most festival awards.

The trajectory of the other Iraq docs shows that a grassroots outreach approach, with free screenings and viewing parties, only helps to promote DVD sales rather than theatrical success. The release strategy of *The Ground Truth*, the major competitor for *The War Tapes*, has been low-key, although the distributor, Focus Features, is owned by Universal. Its one-week theatrical run yielded meager box-office returns of \$20,000. The mostly community-based release of *The Ground Truth* in September 2006 happened to collide with the release of *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers*, which used a similar grassroots outreach strategy. Films about Iraqi civilians such as *Voices of Iraq*, *About Baghdad*, *The Blood of My Brother* or *My Country, My Country*, had even more difficulties in finding audiences in the U.S. American audiences have shown very little interest in the plight of their Arab counterparts.

In sum, in terms of creating publics, *Iraq for Sale*, *Iraq in Fragments* and *The War Tapes* seem to be the most active projects. Yet, there is only a small, confined target audience for Iraq documentaries and the sheer number of them risk cannibalizing one another's audiences. A well-funded theatrical release over several weeks in a significant number of theatres might still be the best strategy to launch a movie into the broader public consciousness.

## Conclusions

### **The Film's Larger Role as a Public Media Project**

*The War Tapes* was intended to be part of a larger movement of citizen participation in journalism and the media, which counteracts the consolidation trend in corporate media that is limiting the number of voices that can be heard in mainstream outlets. The film was supposed to give a platform to different viewpoints. This counter-movement has been supported by “Web 2.0” Internet technology, but it requires the participation of people who find the stories and make use of the technology to get those stories out.

The creative team for *The War Tapes* is convinced that there will be more media projects like this in the future because of an overall climate of increased instantaneous accountability made possible by technology. This film was not only influenced by new technology, but but reflects the ways in which new recording and communications technology is now available for and used by all soldiers. According to Lacy, soldiers wrote letters, often multiple drafts, in previous wars and were very selective in what they were writing. Yet, camcorders, cellphones and instant messaging make communication during this conflict much more direct and unfiltered. Soldiers talk in real-time about their experiences, and are still connected to the world at home.

*The War Tapes* is unique in extending this new communication pattern between soldiers at war and their families and friends at home into a movie edited and distributed by professionals

However, James thinks that *the War Tapes* was not a citizen journalism project in the strictest sense because the soldiers provided only the footage, and the creative team edited the material and distributed the finished product. The soldiers did not control the final product; this was done by the filmmakers in a complex collaborative process. From the filmmakers' perspective, such aspiring citizen media projects that bring together professional filmmakers and filming subjects are complex not only on organizational but also on an ethical level.

Questions that had to be tackled were, among others: To what degree were the soldiers “used” because they didn't have the opportunity for editorial input while the film was being made? What would have happened if they had been involved more directly? In the case of *The War Tapes*, most of the soldiers had been completely in synch with what the creative team wanted to show. Yet, in other projects, other subjects might have been much more resistant. How would the discussion go if the subjects had different priorities for what they wanted from the film than the filmmakers? For *The War Tapes* it was completely in the hands of the filmmakers whether the film would succeed or fail on this ethical level.

The project was also unusual in that it was produced with, but not for, a military agency. For the National Guard, the film was an experiment that contrasted with their usual way of working with embedded journalists. *The War Tapes* provided an opportunity for the soldiers to tell their story without the biases and filters of a reporter, without the middlemen. However, the National Guard did not want their soldiers to be citizen journalists. To the contrary, all National Guard soldiers being deployed to Iraq were briefed on public affairs matters, the rules for appropriate e-mailing, blogging, uploading films on public Web sites and on the wider ramifications of putting material on the Internet. The soldiers that filmed *The War Tapes* were not exempted from those rules that might have been spurred by other instances in which soldiers have recorded military activities and caused trouble for the military, such as photographing the incidents in Abu Ghraib.

*The War Tapes* engaged a number of different groups in the production process across cultural divides and reached out to different publics. The attached nodes (Appendix I) and related map (Appendix II) illustrate the network of the groups engaged.

### **Lessons Learned**

**Public media projects can and should engage multiple publics:** While the success of the *War Tapes* in reaching out to political, military and tech-savvy publics was mixed, the filmmakers' strategy was innovative and serves as a template for future participatory filmmaking projects.

**Media-makers should stick to a multi-level strategy to reach their goal:** The early activities of building community and attracting national attention through actively participating in the blogosphere, especially in the milblog community, paid off. Yet, this strategy was abandoned in the middle of the outreach phase in favor of a more traditional movie outreach plan; therefore the discussions did not have a chance to take off on a national level.

**It's important to create feedback opportunities to build community:** Anecdotal evidence at theatrical screenings and blogging responses indicated that *The War Tapes* initiated community-building between soldiers and the general public, although only on a small scale.

**An unfiltered, honest film facilitates conversations and understanding among audiences and the production team:** *The War Tapes* served as a catalyst to convey feelings that the soldiers otherwise could not have shared with their families and friends home. It helped to start conversations. *The War Tapes* also bridged cultural divides between the people involved in the production process.

## **APPENDIX**

## I. NODES

*The War Tapes* engaged the following groups:

### **Creative Team**

Director Deborah Scranton,  
Executive Producer Chuck Lacy  
Producer Robert May, SenArt Films  
Producer/Editor Steve James

### **Funders**

Chuck Lacy  
further private funders

### **Outreach/Distribution**

SenArt Films for distribution  
Jeff Lipsky for theatrical sales  
Internet experts such as Zephyr Teachout  
Docurama for DVD sales  
Military Channel for TV broadcast

### **Publics**

Political Conservatives  
Political Progressives  
Arthouse Theatre and Film Festival Audience  
Internet Savvy Publics (Bloggers, Readers and Contributors to [www.thewartapes.com](http://www.thewartapes.com))

### **Military Community**

Military Organizations and other Multipliers as partners such as Military.com and IAVA  
Military Personnel

- Soldiers deployed in Iraq
- Veterans

Relatives and Friends of deployed Soldiers

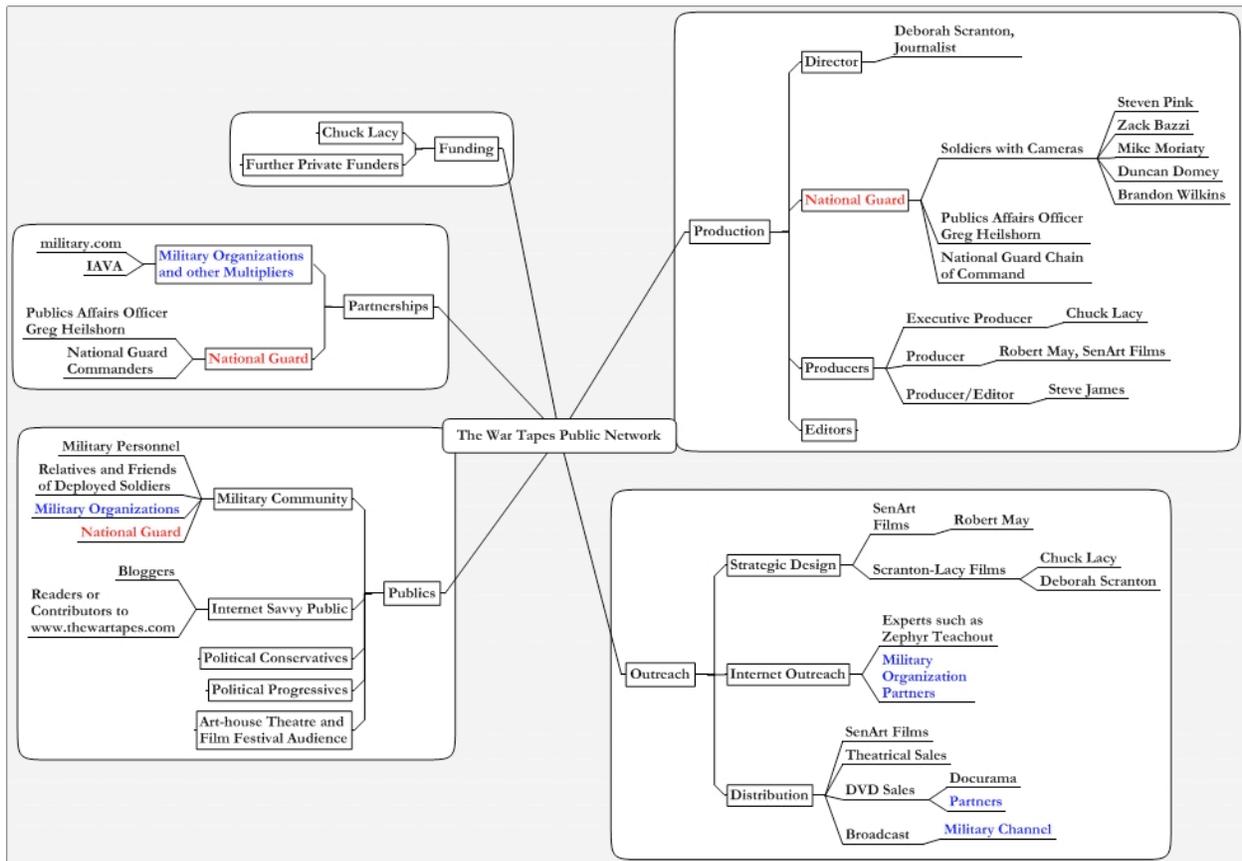
National Guard

- Public Affairs Officer
- Soldiers with Cameras (Steven Pink, Zack Bazzi, Mike Moriaty, Duncan Domey, Brandon Wilkins)
- National Guard Commanders
- National Guard Soldiers

## II. MAP

The map below provides an illustration of all the related nodes that acted through and were affected by *The War Tapes*.

Although only a static illustration of the network, it is clearly visible that boundaries that were formerly set by filmmaking processes are penetrated by the publics involved. Partner organizations such as the National Guard are involved in the production while at the same time serving a public for the film. Similarly, military organizations serve as communication multipliers within the public they serve. Former boundaries and linear communication processes become permeable and interactive.



### III. MEDIA ANALYSES

The analysis below depicts the reaction of different media outlets to certain outreach activities related to *The War Tapes*. It is based on a LexisNexis database search covering the period from April to November 2006 that included newspaper articles, newswire reports and broadcast transcripts mentioning the film (full text search based on keyword “*The War Tapes*”.)

The timeline shows how the media coverage moved through the weeks and different channels as the buzz on the Internet and responses to theatrical and festivals screenings developed. The world premiere and the film’s winning the Best Documentary Film Award at the Tribeca Film Festival in late April 2006 initiated a first small peak in media coverage. However, the graph reveals that multi-channel media coverage only started after the theatrical premiere and the following three-week screenings in New York in June 2006. As the media coverage continuously declined over the following weeks, additional peaks could be seen in August and September when the largest number of local theatrical and festival screenings took place. Another increase in media coverage happened in October after the announcement that *The War Tapes* made the short list of the Academy Awards for best feature documentary.

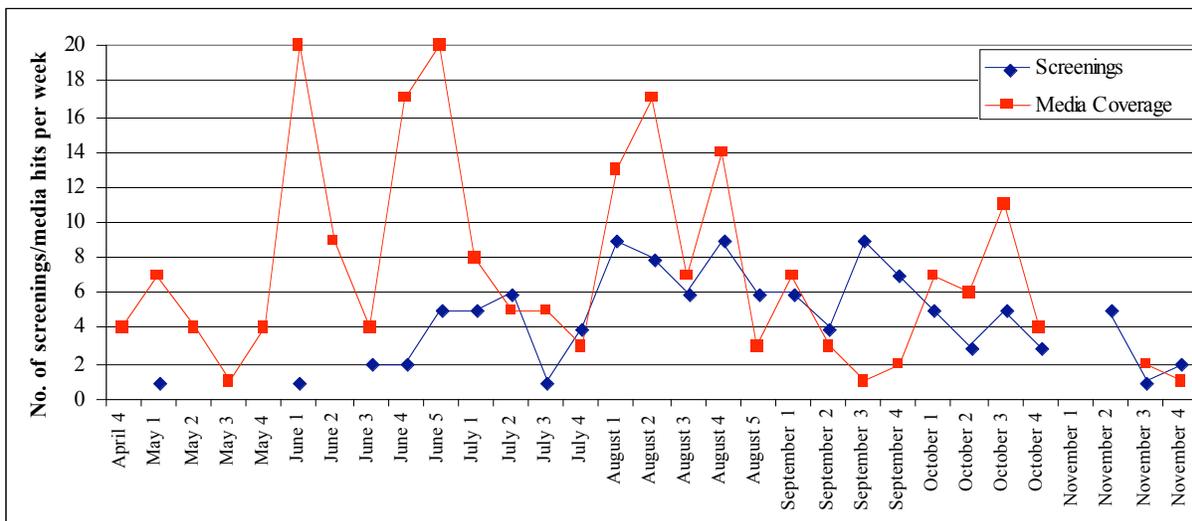


Chart I: Comparison of Media Coverage and Theatrical Screenings per Week

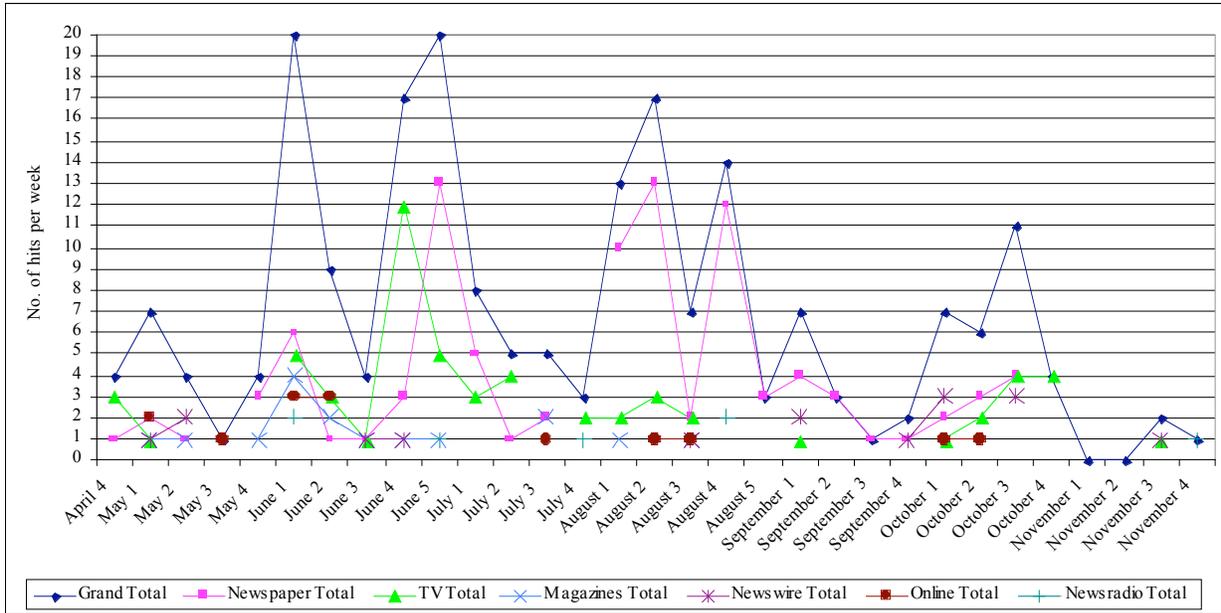


Chart II: Media Coverage per different Channels per Week

The movie generated a total of 209 media hits during that period, of which almost half were local newspaper coverage of local screenings. The second greatest level of media coverage was achieved by local TV stations, which either announced local theatrical screenings or did interviews with cast or production team members, often with a local angle. News radio, especially talk radio, is an important media multiplier; therefore it is surprising that the film was not covered more in such media outlets.

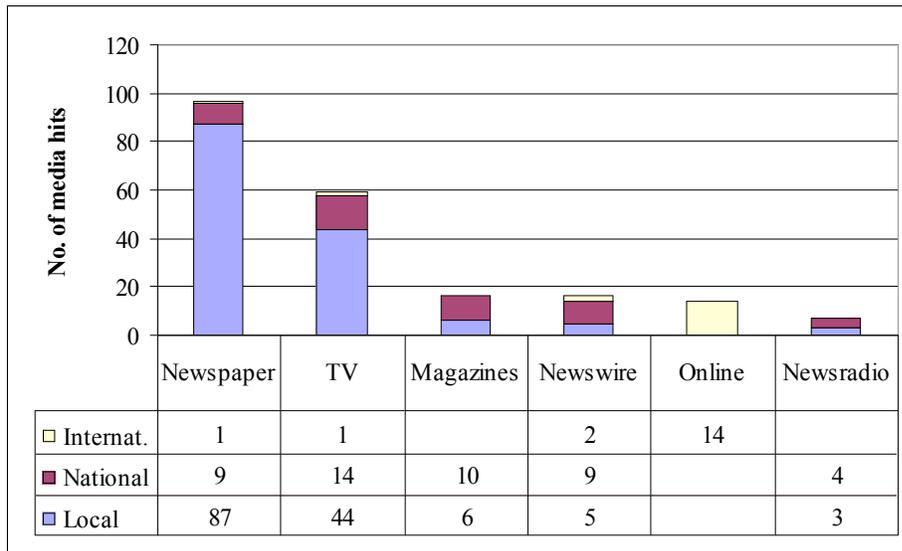


Chart III: Total Media Coverage per Media Channel