
WASHINGTON, D.C., Feb. 19 – Today, the Center for Media & Social Impact Director releases its latest report, “Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk when Telling Truth to Power” at the Center’s 11th Annual Media That Matters conference at American University. The report is also available at cmsimpact.org/dangerousdocs. The report, funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, describes the challenges filmmakers face when they tackle deep-pocketed, powerful subjects, the forms of support available and necessary next steps to further lower risk and reduce chilling effects.

“Documentaries that tell truth to power are important in a media ecology that can sustain and nurture democratic discourse,” said Prof. Patricia Aufderheide, Principal Investigator of the report. “Understanding the current environment for production is crucial to understanding what makers need and can do to lower risk.”

The report finds that although serious legal trouble is rare, risks are real and can create a chilling effect on works exploring important social issues. The most common areas of concern include personal security, data security, publicity attacks (smear campaigns), insurance issues, and litigation.

The report notes that makers who identify either as journalists or filmmakers face the same problems, but often do not share the same body of information or networks—and should. "It is so important to highlight the lack of a true, centralized resource and training hub for documentary filmmakers in the US. There is much to be done outside of advocacy and exhibition," said Deirdre Haj, Executive Director of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival.

“‘Dangerous Documentaries’ lays out the challenges and risks that journalists and documentary filmmakers encounter every day, even though their missions differ,” said American University Professor of Journalism Lynne Perri. “This new report offers advice, best practices and wish-lists, including a legal-defense fund. The study also provides a wealth of resources that will aid those new to the field, and reminds those
who routinely take on the powerful that many organizations are able to lend guidance and support."

One area that the report notes is particularly weak in resources is safety and security, both of makers and their subjects. "This is an important work on filmmaker security issues that fills a void in the field," said Director/Producer Katy Chevigny of Big Mouth Productions. Her most recent work, The E-Team, sent production personnel into conflict situations as they followed first-responders in the human rights community.

The report was built on 53 interviews of makers of non-fiction films and TV programs, programmers, funders, lawyers, and insurers, as well as a wide search of literature and participation in public events. The report synthesizes suggestions from the interviewees to improve the environment. These include: reduce cultural differences and share resources between journalism and filmmaking; make more and better training and resources available; increase organizational support for such work; and centralize knowledge in community forums and best practices.

The report highlights the importance of membership organizations in supporting filmmakers and journalists who do this sometimes-dangerous work. International Documentary Association Board President Marjan Safinia said, “This report is packed full of information, and gives lots of food for thought for how organizations like IDA can meet the need in the field.”

The report was previewed at the IDA conference “Getting Real,” where journalists and filmmakers held a working group to discuss its interim results. The final version was previewed at the Sundance Film Festival in January. After the February 19 full paper release at Media That Matters, the report will also be presented at the conference “Based on a True Story” at the University of Missouri’s Journalism School and at Full Frame Documentary Festival, as well as at academic conferences.

About the Researchers

American University Professor and Center for Media & Social Impact Director Patricia Aufderheide was principal investigator. Center for Media & Social Impact Associate Director Angelica Das was project manager. Graduate fellows Stephanie Brown and Olga Khrustaleva assisted with research. Consultant Deborah Goldman contributed legal research. Legal fellow Anuj Gupta assisted Ms. Goldman with legal research. Graduate fellows Daniela Pérez Frías and Daniel Ball-Farber contributed to production.

About the Center for Media & Social Impact

The Center for Media & Social Impact at American University, formerly the Center for Social Media, is an innovation lab and research center that studies, designs, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary and public
media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media production, media impact, public policy and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matters.

The Center was founded in 2001 by Patricia Aufderheide, University Professor in the School of Communication at American University.

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