



Making Your Documentary Matter: Main points



By *Barbara Abrash*

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Making Your Documentary Matter, a workshop held at the [Center for Social Media](#)

on February 7, 2005 was a showcase of strategies and resources for 130 independent media makers and users. They heard experts from the worlds of social documentary funding, broadcast and strategic outreach share their creative insights. The workshop encouraged filmmakers to think of their documentaries not only as films, but as projects. The workshop was funded by the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

Filmmaker, activist and student interest in this workshop vividly demonstrate the transformation in thinking about strategic uses of social documentaries. What used to be thought of as “outreach,” an add-on to a theatrical screening or broadcast, has evolved into dynamic field of strategic design and use. Working with outreach specialists, independent film makers are building bridges between public television and communities; between entertainment and engagement; and across differences of opinion. They’re telling compelling stories that audiences with diverse perspectives can plug into, and they’re discovering that public broadcast is just one among many venues for social change media.

“For some of us, it’s not enough to make a great movie. You need to find the viewers who need it, who will use it, who will change their lives and those of others because they made connections that you helped to make.” **Pat Aufderheide**, Director, Center for Social Media, American University

“There has been a sea change in the role of the foundation,” said **Joy Thomas Moore** of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which funded the event. *“Production, outreach and action all come together.”* Outreach planning begins with pre-production and should be part of your funding package.

The program featured two panels: **Partners and Funders for Social Docs: The View from Inside** and **Broadcast Doc Outreach: Secrets from the Pros**, and provided ample time for networking between sessions. A screening of Tod Lending’s new film, *Omar and Pete*—a veritable poster child for “best practices” in documentary film outreach and audience engagement—capped the day.



The Annie E. Casey Foundation



PANEL ONE

Partners and Funders for Social Docs: The View from Inside

“How can the passions of documentary makers be connected with the needs of funders?”

Joy Moore’s opening question was answered by panelists Diana Ingraham ([U.S. Independents](#)), Robert West ([Working Films](#)), and Cheryl Head ([CPB](#)), who offered three models of partnership.



Diana Ingraham, Director of U.S. Independents Inc., outlined the **educational partnership** between Daniel Anker’s film about the Philadelphia Orchestra, *Music from the Inside Out* (2004) and the American Association for Music Education – which saw the film as an opportunity to catalyze public

discussion about the value of arts in the schools, at a time of funding cutbacks. Ingraham emphasized the need for flexibility, noting that an earlier co-sponsoring organization had proved to be a poor fit. Working with a co-sponsor means being in tune with their project goals and constraints, and gaining expert knowledge of their field. She also noted that teachers need both a long lead time—they often work with curricula designed the year before—and usually can only use videos that are directly related to curricula. So it pays to study a school district’s curriculum design. In the case of *Music from the Inside Out*, homework paid off. Outreach programs, which included teaching materials, took the film beyond its 2001 PBS broadcast, to the organization’s 100,000 members

Key points:

- Involve partners early and keep them engaged;
- Align project goals with those of your partners;
- Understand what teachers need.

Robert West, Executive Director of Working Films says, “Great stories of social justice always have impact, but you need to have a strategy and be committed to it. And filmmakers don’t have to run it.” **Issue partnerships** drove Working Films’ outreach planning for *Blue Vinyl* - Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold’s “toxic comedy” about the health hazards of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), which was broadcast on HBO in 2002. The strategic campaign for *Blue Vinyl*, which was conceived as a community organizing tool, tapped into the network of grassroots organizers,

Key points:

- Sustain relationships;
- Develop measures of impact.

health care professionals, and faith-based organizations that Helfand (co-founder of Working Films) assembled for her first film, *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1996). West noted that it takes about two years for a film to become embedded in the work plans of an issue partner. A Working Films DVD highlighted

successful use of the film by nonprofits who had become partners, including the construction of Habitat for Humanity’s first PVC-free home.

Cheryl Head, Senior Director of Outreach and Diversity Programming at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, stressed the importance of a strong story with compelling characters. She described three **institutional partnership** resources available through CPB, whose mandate is to serve un- and



underserved audiences: ITVS, which has an outreach strategies group; the Minority Consortia, whose emphasis is on customized, localized audiences; and the CPB Outreach Fund, which provides \$150,000-\$200,000 grants for prime-time broadcasts.

According to Head, filmmakers are not necessarily the best people to strategize or execute outreach. In the case of Whitney Dow and Marco Williams' *Two Towns of Jasper*, which was broadcast on P.O.V. in 2003, CPB drew outreach partners together in an immensely successful outreach campaign that ranged from national commercial TV appearances on *Oprah* and *Nightline* to community screenings that triggered unprecedented public discussion on race.

Key points:

- Have clear message points;
- Know the audiences you want to reach, and why the film will be important to them;
- Reach out for professional expertise.

PANEL TWO

Broadcast Doc Outreach: Secrets from the Pros

How can a documentary entertain a general television audience and also be a useful tool for community and educational use?

Cara Mertes ([P.O.V.](#)), Ellen Schneider ([Active Voice®](#)), Melissa Hook ([Victim Assistance Legal Organization](#)), and Judith Ravitz ([Outreach Extensions](#)) had plenty of answers.

Key points:

- A well-crafted human story that treats people fairly;
- Strong support materials;
- Feedback.

Cara Mertes, P.O.V. Executive Director, said

“It’s not a choice of either/or, it’s about reaching both heart and head.” She described P.O.V.’s three-pronged outreach strategy for “general entertainment stories that hit home with community and educational groups”: 1. exposure to 2-4 million television viewers; 2. engagement



with communities of interest, through e-alerts, events, and lesson plans; and 3. tools for filmmakers to move into action. Tami Gold and Kelly Anderson’s *Every Mother’s Son* (2004) is a vivid example. This film, the twin goals of which are to reach police audiences and to promote community involvement local policing, tells the story of “three women who turn the deaths of their sons at the hands of police into an opportunity for profound social change”. The project was strengthened by strategic planning that brought community members and police groups into the process. The film was initially designed to express outrage at police abuses – which would inevitably have alienated officers before engaging them. Mertes’ role was essential in helping the filmmakers strategically rethink the film, in order to open discussion about problems in policing, and how communities and police can work together on shared problems.



For **Ellen Schneider**, Executive Director of Active Voice®, the goal is to help publics understand what’s at stake and what they can do, by putting “a human face on public policy”. Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini’s *Farmingville* (2003) —about a suburban

community in conflict over the presence of Mexican day laborers -- demonstrates how Active Voice® worked with filmmakers, on- and off-broadcast, in an outreach campaign that engaged policy-makers, stake holders, and opponents in a campaign targeted at the 80% of viewers who hold no strong position on the issue of immigrant labor. P.O.V. broadcast, plus companion materials, encouraged partners--from the National Council of State Legislators to labor activists--to use the film in advocacy and educational programs. Schneider points out that there is often a big split in opinion on contentious social issues, and that it's essential to engage the people who might not agree with your point of view. By focusing on the "people in the middle," the film lent itself to honest, difficult discussions that brought out differing opinions.

Key points:

- Strong characters;
- Highlight promising practices;
- Provide guidance to advocates on how to use media.

Melissa Hook, Deputy Executive Director of the Victim Assistance Legal Organization, was hired by [ITVS](#) as National Outreach Coordinator for *Sentencing the Victim* (2004), Joanna Katz's film about her brutal rape. She



Key points:

- Be aware of turf issues among partner organizations;
- Don't avoid the opposition.

calls film a "maximum way of educating the public." It can also produce changes in the law. Pre-broadcast screenings and local public television led to parole board reform legislation which was announced in the South Carolina legislature on the day of 2004 national broadcast on *Independent Lens*. The outreach campaign extended not only to crime victim services and criminal justice groups, but to conservative organizations that preferred not to be publicly associated with the film.

Partnerships, sustainability, and leveraging resources – familiar themes of the day – came together in the remarks of **Judith Ravitz**, President of Outreach Extensions, which organizes national media outreach campaigns. She sketched outreach strategies and components for Tod Lending's new film, *Omar & Pete* (2005), which follows the paths of two men as they leave a Baltimore prison and face the challenges of life on the outside.

Scheduled for September 13, 2005 broadcast on *P.O.V.*, *Omar & Pete* will be launched through the [Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign](#), an umbrella project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation which is designed to serve community and faith organizations. The



Key points:

- Identify community needs;
- Build sustainable networks;
- Work with organizations that have strong reputations and the ability to reach people in the community.

Reentry project circulates broadcast and non-broadcast documentaries (covering a two-year period) about formerly incarcerated individuals who are reentering into family and community. It builds on the 5-year, high-impact outreach strategies developed by Outreach Extensions for Tod Lending's earlier film, *Legacy*, and uses a data base of community partners that was developed in partnership with the Urban

Institute that now anchors a sustainable network of community organizations. It is important, says Ravitz, to identify the needs of the community experts who are your target audience, and to provide tools and sustainable relationships that will be of value.

CONCLUSION

Making Your Documentary Matter demonstrated the flexibility and utility of social documentaries, which now can be used in settings that range from friends-and-family to training to broadcast. It also demonstrated that this is relatively uncharted terrain, and that media makers and funders are eager to explore the possibilities opened by new technologies and circuits of circulation.

Consistent Themes:

- Strategize early about multiple uses of the film and about potential constituencies;
- Seek out institutional partners who can provide feedback;
- Find funders and partners who support work on the issues in the film;
- Get professional help wherever possible, on both strategic design and audience engagement.

Filmmakers, students, programmers and activists were drawn together by the opportunity to share ideas, to find successful models, to network, and to identify funding opportunities. Media makers learned that funding for outreach and production go together. They learned that strategic planning strengthens a project. And finally, they learned that outreach specialists stand ready to help.

The workshop was a revelation of how dynamic and diverse—and how

idiosyncratic—strategic campaigns are. These case studies may be seen as laboratory experiments in methods of engaging audiences, addressing social problems, building community networks, and stimulating social action. They demonstrate the importance and the need for thoroughly researched case studies—ones that can trace strategies that worked and that didn't, and take account of the surprises: unintended consequences, unanticipated results, and what simply arises because new spaces invite what may have not been imagined before.

For more information, including case studies, books, articles and links to organizations mentioned during the workshop, go to

http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/res_audience.html

To provide feedback on this report, contact the Center at 202-885-3017 or email socialmedia@american.edu.