



## **Making Your Documentary Matter: Public Engagement Strategies that Work**

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Rapporteur's Report  
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## Introduction

The day-long conference on January 30, 2006, “Making Your Documentary Matter: Public Engagement Strategies that Work,” which drew 200 people to American University, explored innovative ways in which independent documentary filmmakers are working with non-profit organizations, grassroots groups, and public institutions to expand the reach and use of independent films in fostering civic dialogue and social action.

Emerging digital technologies have transformed the production and circulation of documentary films, creating new opportunities for strategic media campaigns with clear goals, audiences and outcomes in mind. This has both expanded the effective range of independent documentary beyond the realm of television broadcast and conventional “outreach” and challenged independent media makers to think collaboratively, in terms of the partnerships, alliances, and coalition-building that are key to successful strategies for public engagement.

Independent filmmakers and non-profit organizations often share a commitment to social justice and a healthy civil society. To non-profit organizations, filmmakers can offer the storytelling skills that bring abstract issues to life, as well as the savvy that informs an effective media campaign. At the same time, non-profit organizations provide structured pathways for distribution and opportunities for both virtual and face-to-face exchange that can vastly expand the reach and effective use of documentary films. These partnerships and the innovative strategies for public engagement they produce are creating possibilities for imagining documentary for social impact beyond conventional broadcast and outreach models. Increasingly, the lines between production and outreach are blurry: to be effective, strategic outreach planning must be built in from the start.

Partnerships, alliances, and coalition-building increase the power and reach of social issue initiatives. But working relationships between documentary filmmakers who jealously guard their independent voices and organizations with their own agendas and cultures require clearly articulated understandings (i.e., contracts), negotiation, patience and skill. Conference participants discussed the opportunities and pitfalls of negotiating and sustaining this collaborative work, and highlighted successful examples of *production partnerships*, *distribution partnerships*, and *bridge building*.

They agreed that there is a trend toward *tighter interconnections* between independent filmmakers and non-profits, and that *partnerships, collaborations and alliances* vastly expand the reach and effectiveness of social issue media. At the same time, *roles and terms must be clearly spelled out*, for these relationships to work. There was also agreement that the *line between production and distribution has blurred*, and that it is necessary to *start public engagement planning early* and to anticipate a *long tail* of distribution.

## Keynote

The theme of the conference was synthesized in the presentation of Cynthia Lopez, marketing director for the public TV documentary series *P.O.V.* The series’ goal is not merely to broadcast important work, she said, but to make it meaningful and useable to people in communities

everywhere. Thus, traditional terms such as marketing and publicity and even traditional techniques are all in the service of public engagement. To that end, the series establishes long term partnerships with organizations such as the American Library Association, which sponsors special viewing and discussion sessions. It also researches associations appropriate to a film's theme, and develops in-depth resources online for viewers who want to know more. Increasingly, the series is becoming an entry point for a wide variety of public concerns.

## **Producing Partnerships**

What happens when an independent filmmaker goes to work with a non-profit organization that sees film as a tool? How can thorny areas like creative control and setting boundaries be negotiated? It means developing clear and trusting relationships that lead to clear goals, inputs, and results. Several such relationships showcased in the conference illustrate the *tightening interdependence* between filmmakers who can tell powerful stories and organizations with a strong idea of the stories they want to tell and how, and problems that can arise when the goals and timetables of filmmaking don't match those of the sponsoring organization.

Veteran documentarians Chris Palmer and John de Graaf described the relationship between seasoned media professionals and a national organization with a well-defined agenda in the production of *Buyer Be Fair* – a film about environmental labeling that grew out of the National Wildlife Federation's interests in Fair Trade coffee and Forest Stewardship Council certified wood. Palmer warned the audience to dispense with altruism at the start, and to understand well the objectives and identity of the non-profit organization ([LINK TO HIS REMARKS](#)). De Graaf had brought this project to NWF, which was working on the issue. The project developed further with the addition of NWF's expertise, but DeGraaf wanted control over the film. The relationship matured best when the project was brought out of NWF to American University, while NWF maintained a role as a content collaborator.

Filmmaker Charlene Gilbert and representatives of the Annie E. Casey Foundation established terms at the outset. The Foundation wanted a film on a successful alternative sentencing project for young people, and came to Gilbert with the messages they wanted to deliver. Gilbert conditioned acceptance of the project on her agreeing with the Foundation about the value of the program; once she saw it, she did agree. She also explained to the Foundation representatives her expectation to have creative autonomy over how she made the film, which is still in process. Having seen her earlier work, Foundation representatives were happy to agree.

The role of the filmmaker can go beyond production. Robin Smith, who provides advice on campaign strategies as well as production services through her company, Video Action, found an ideal non-profit partner in Carol Prest and the Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) project. According to Prest – who commissioned a series of films made in collaboration with grantees in order to introduce media strategies into their own projects – “films can animate the spirit of a project.”

What are the elements for successful producing partnerships?

- Set out clear terms, from issues of creative control to financial relationships, ownership and rights. Written contracts are essential.
- Choose clients whose values match yours.

- Bring strong storytelling skills to your client’s message.
- Build long term goals and strategies in from the start.
- Be willing to negotiate and listen.

## Distribution Partnerships

The distribution of social issue documentaries has expanded dramatically in the last 10 years, powered by digital technologies and coalition-building strategies. Television broadcast may be just one element in a long-term strategic design campaign that extends from churches and schools to the Internet and text messaging. Strategic outreach campaigns articulate their goals, which may range from providing information and raising awareness to stimulating action. As strategic outreach becomes more sophisticated, the need to evaluate results comes to the fore.

Paula Silver described the phased rollout strategy developed for a film about Cuban dance. Substantial work went into planning—identifying core audiences, developing messages about the work, discovering good publicity “hooks.” Building on the buzz created with an *open tent* broadcast that invited wide public participation, the campaign then moved to *sequential distribution* to specific audiences and more focused on action.

Phased outreach was also a feature of the educational, long-term distribution of *Aging Out*, a documentary by Roger Weisberg about teens leaving the foster care system that offers practical solutions. This was a coalition-building model, in which the *media phase* – broadcast and theatrical screenings – was followed by the *community phase* of screenings organized through a network of partnerships. Judith Ravitz described this as a solution-based and sustainable “evergreen” project. The engagement team was given a special challenge when, tragically, one of the featured teens was killed shortly after the release of the film. Ravitz’ team worked closely with community leaders to deal sensitively with the tragedy.

For Arts Engine, makers of *Deadline*, about the death penalty, working with anti-death penalty groups from the start paid off once the film had aired on NBC. Arts Engine’s Shira Golding described the ongoing use of *Deadline* at the community level, through such activist organizations.

The makers of *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices* built their audiences into every phase of the film, including production. Lisa Smithline described Brave New Films’ on-line campaign, which mobilized 1,000 “volunteer producers,” thereby localizing production. These volunteers were also allies in the search for organizations that could be agents of “viral marketing,” using the film in a wide variety of action contexts. Working with an emergent alliance of 150 groups worldwide, Brave New Films built an outreach model based on a two-step approach – “first buzz, then a tool” – that includes the Internet, inexpensive DVDs, and grassroots gatherings.

Veteran and Academy-Award-winning filmmaker Gerardine Wurzburg noted that different distribution logics are appropriate for different kinds of films – and that distribution goals affect the design. She demonstrated this with two films: *Prostate Cancer: Are You At Risk?* and *Autism Is a World*. The first was produced with the American Cancer Society and National Cancer Institute – organizations that are common conduits for information on the disease—with a clear

action goal of increasing awareness among African-American men. A high-profile national campaign included PBS broadcast on Father's Day during National Prostate Cancer Awareness Week, followed by intensive community distribution. This sharply focused campaign featured a celebrity (Colin Powell) and enlisted national partners including the NAACP and Urban League. Free materials were disseminated to support groups and were made available through an American Cancer Society 800 number. *Autism Is a World*, by contrast, is a powerfully moving portrait of a young autistic woman who conquered her isolation with the help of new keyboarding technology. The film tells a classic story of achievement; after its debut on CNN, autism support groups and medical care personnel have adopted it as an evergreen educational tool.

Distribution is no longer distinct from outreach; core audiences and niche audiences are new allies in long-tail distribution. Speakers described common-sense wisdom for cultivating such relationships:

- Know your audiences and create structured opportunities for encounter and exchange.
- Create diverse partnerships that extend the reach and effectiveness of media campaigns.
- Use a two-step approach in which the film first creates a buzz, and then becomes a tool for social change enhances long-tail distribution and use.
- Achieve sustainability with practical, solution-based films that are part of long term campaigns.

How can social impact of distribution be evaluated? Sometimes there are concrete results. In the case of Wal-Mart, pointed out Smithline, the revelation that states were bearing the costs of insurance denied to employees' children resulted in the passage of corrective legislation in Maryland. Wurzburg pointed out that health sponsors and funders have high expectations for quantitative testing results. In the case of *Prostate Cancer*, control groups were tested for three outcomes: increased knowledge; increased ability to deal with the problem; and action taken. In some cases, discussion among people who may never have considered another point of view on an issue itself is the result.

### **Building bridges across difference with media**

Social issue documentary can bring together the like-minded. Just as important and possibly more powerfully, it can serve as a bridge to conversation among those who differ. Sandy Dubowski's *Trembling Before G-d*, a film about gay Orthodox Jews, has spoken to the experiences of Mormons, Catholics, and others, gay and straight alike – across platforms and face-to-face. In addition to extensive theatrical screenings and DVD distribution, outreach strategies for this film that touches raw feelings and vulnerable people focus on carefully framed discussion and small-group conversation. Dubowski explained that the film was structured to showcase the painful reality of gay Orthodox men and women; he wanted to begin any conversation about the issue with acknowledgement that this is part of a broader human reality. The film thus does not demand capitulation from opponents, but asks for a different kind of conversation than the usual one. He has worked steadily from the friendliest environments to the next most friendly, gaining credibility through association until even traditional Hasidic homes has welcomed him (and the TV and VCR he had to bring with him) in for a screening and conversation.

How can you reach people for whom your film is intended, but who might not be drawn to your subject? In the case of *College Track*, a film about the social price paid by those who don't attend college – and how their educational fate might be sealed by the fifth grade – Roundtable Media bridged class barriers with a carefully programmed coalition-building National Awareness Initiative in 150 cities. The project was bankrolled with a substantial foundation grant, which permitted elaborate community partnerships.

Such engagement can be done with lower budgets, as an outreach toolkit available on MediaRights.org (<http://www.mediarights.org/toolkit/>) demonstrates. As well, such work is done with tax dollars, through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the umbrella organization for public TV's federal allocations. CPB's Angela Palmer described its Outreach Fund, which is designed to "build bridges to many communities" and looks for out-of-the-box projects that reach communities in innovative ways (<http://www.cpb.org/grants/tvoutreach/>).

## **Conclusion**

Conferees discussed the following questions, arising from current trends: In a profit-driven environment, how can documentary makers—examples *par excellence* of mission-driven media makers--adapt the *strategies and techniques of commercial media* in the service of mission-driven projects? What *economic models* can be devised to sustain non-profit work? Finally, what are the most appropriate *measures of evaluation* for improving, funding, and advancing this work? Panels featured a range of ways that people were answering those questions today, while looking for tomorrow's answers.

## Participants

Panelists included filmmakers, academics, strategic design specialists and funders, several of whom wore two hats. They included:

Barbara Abrash, Center for Media, Culture and History, NYU  
Pat Aufderheide, Center for Social Media, American University  
Orlando Bagwell, Ford Foundation  
John de Graaf, filmmaker (*Buyer Be Fair*)  
Sandi DuBowski, filmmaker ( *Trembling Before G-d*)  
Charlene Gilbert, American University and filmmaker (*Children Will Listen*)  
Shira Golding, MediaRights/Arts Engine Inc.  
Larry Kirkman, Dean, School of Communication, American University  
Robert Lavelle, Roundtable Media  
Cynthia Lopez, *P.O.V.*  
Angela Palmer, Corporation for Public Broadcasting  
Chris Palmer, American University and filmmaker (*Buyer Be Fair*)  
Carol Prest, Mid-Atlantic for BELL (Building Educated leaders for Life)  
Judith Ravitz, Outreach Extensions  
Ellen Schneider, Active Voice  
Paula Silver, Beyond the Box  
Robin Smith, Video/Action  
Lisa Smithline, Brave New Films  
Robert West, Working Films  
Gerardine Wurzburg, State of the Art, Inc. and filmmaker (*Autism Is a World*)