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## Collaborative strategies for social action filmmakers

By Pat Aufderheide

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When Judith Helfand began working on her second documentary feature, *Blue Vinyl*, a “toxic comedy” about the carcinogenic life cycle of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), she heeded a lesson learned in making *A Healthy Baby Girl*: partner with advocates. She found community and environmental organizations working on this issue, especially near the Baton Rouge-area plants that produce PVC. Then she went to funders that fund community development and efforts to resist environmental toxins. The Ford Foundation’s Community and Resource Development unit—which had never funded a film before—gave her an initial production grant for \$150,000.

Filmmaker-photographer Ellen Frankenstein moved to the picturesque tourist spot of Sitka, Alaska to make a film on Native American culture, and ended up staying. Her contacts with local schools led her to a group of restless teens. She won a Rockefeller Foundation grant from its Partnership Affirming Community Transformation, to organize teen after-school activities. Long after the initial grant was used up, the group continued. One of its projects, to make a video on life in Sitka from a teen perspective, became the film *No Loitering*, with the help of ITVS and Juneau pubtv station KTOO.

Stanley Nelson, whose award-winning work for public television includes *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, was the filmmaker the Carnegie Corporation of New York turned to when the foundation wanted to focus on election campaign reform. New York’s reforms resulted in exciting races where grassroots candidates came forward. Nelson documented several of those races in *Running: the Campaign for City Council*. His ability to partner with WNET, which guaranteed an audience, was critical to Carnegie.

For these filmmakers, and for many others, collaboration is key both to funding a project and to shaping it. Collaboration flies in the face of the heroic myth of the independent filmmaker. An updated version of the 19th century novelist in the garret, this mythic filmmaker now captures an incredibly powerful narrative without leaving a smudge of a footprint on history and then retires to her studio apartment to edit the piece on her PC, until it’s Sundanceable. All this, obligatorily, after years toiling in obscurity.

Filmmakers generally understand that the lone artist image is fictional, given an artistic process that is collaborative at its core. But too many filmmakers avoid building bridges to organizations that can feed them information, critique their work and thus ward off big fat mistakes and public embarrassment, can find them audiences and even funding. Some documentarians do seek out benefits of collaboration from the get-go. It’s a way to deepen ties to communities in which the filmmaker will be working for some time; it’s a way to find funders whose issues are promoted by the work. And it’s a ready-made network to draw on for distribution, outreach and action strategies on release. For instance, when he was making *Licensed to Kill*, about hate-crime murderers, Arthur

Dong worked with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP), which has more 26 member organizations around the country. Members of the coalition held publicity-attracting screenings and discussions when the film was broadcast on public TV. The anti-toxics coalition Coming Clean that Helfand turned to in her original research helped get audiences for *Blue Vinyl* when it was cablecast on HBO.

Can partnerships and collaboration limit a filmmaker's creative freedom? This common concern is better stood on its head. Can isolation, lack of resources, and lack of feedback stunt a filmmaker's creativity? Funders who fund media often want to see that filmmakers have solid relationships that enable a project. Among the many funders who contributed small amounts of money to Arthur Dong's latest film, *Family Fundamentals*, on religious families of gays and lesbians, the Fund for a Just Society looked carefully at his board of advisors to ascertain that he had a broad range of support from religious organizations.

Collaborations each have an idiosyncratic design that fit the partners and the need. But a participatory, consult-the-stakeholders, involve-the-organizations approach is one that many funders respond to, and it certainly is one that helps filmmakers identify potential new sources of support. The Council on Foundations, a member association of private foundations, has for 35 years sponsored a film festival for its members, to demonstrate how different foundation agendas can be met with high-quality media funding. It has now developed a website ([www.fundfilm.org](http://www.fundfilm.org)) to help funders better understand the rich potential of media. The site includes the full text of a useful and highly readable book edited by Karen Hirsch, *Why Fund Media*, including some of the stories I've used here, and an essay listing ten reasons why funders fund media (written by David Haas and myself). Oriented to private funders, it's also useful reading for anyone trying to raise money from them.

Collaborations aren't contracts, and partners aren't clients. Collaborations extend the creative process that filmmakers already cultivate every day. They are flexible relationships that can enable the process of making a film, can enrich the product, and can enliven and deepen a film's connection with an audience.

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