

Rapporteur's Report

Filmanthropy Workshop
June 16, 2007

Presented by SILVERDOCS, in Partnership with American University School of Communication's Institute for Strategic Communication for Nonprofits

Introduction

On June 16, 2007, more than 70 filmmakers, nonprofit communication managers and public engagement practitioners and strategists met during SILVERDOCS to discuss partnerships on social action, advocacy and public information campaigns.

The need for nonprofits and filmmakers to understand each other and work with each other is becoming increasingly important in the emerging digital environment, with new opportunities to support documentary production and for using documentaries in campaigns. The group convened at Discovery Communications headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland and mapped guidelines and best practices for establishing these partnerships. The participants agreed that partners should work with each other to produce films that are both true to a filmmaker's vision and useful to a nonprofit's cause, but they also agreed that in practice this presented numerous challenges.

Opening Remarks

Patricia Finneran, SILVERDOCS Festival Director, opened the discussion by noting that a relationship between documentary filmmaking and advocacy has always existed, but that opportunities for partnerships and funding structures are changing.

Carrie Passmore, Senior Vice President of Corporate Affairs and Social Responsibility at Discovery Communications, laid out several principles for good partnerships that she has learned through her experience at Discovery. These include the importance of declaring priorities and goals at the outset of a project; identifying core competencies and expertise that each partner can bring to the table; maintaining flexibility; and managing expectations.

Larry Kirkman, dean of the School of Communication at American University, said that the school is focusing on "this intersection between social documentary and public information and engagement campaigns -- the dialectic of story and message."

Many of the successful projects discussed in this session, he said, "result from the marriage between a skilled producer with an independent artistic vision and the leadership of an organization with an agenda."

But he said that work was needed to "define the role of social documentaries in the work of organizations, communities and coalitions, and in the context of their opposition and public perception."

Kirkman said that films can engage, inform and mobilize their audiences, but he also raised the possibility that a documentary film can be limiting in service to an issue. "The power of creative filmmaking can bring a campaign to life or it can be a disservice to the cause, an episodic distraction. But a comprehensive thematic campaign can provide a platform for a documentary that will make it more effective in achieving the aspirations of the filmmaker," he said. He argued that nonprofits offer filmmakers knowledge of the issue, networks of people, a trusted "brand" identity, and the ability to fulfill the demand for information and action motivated by their films.

Panel Discussion

Moderator **Jackie Judd**, Vice President and Senior Advisor for Communications at the Kaiser Family Foundation, asked panelists to explore the idea of how filmmakers and nonprofits can leverage each other's strengths to make good partnerships for effective social action campaigns.

John Schreiber, Executive Vice President for Social Action and Advocacy at Participant Productions, took the audience step-by-step through the conception, marketing, and release of *An Inconvenient Truth* (*AIT*) and the accompanying social action campaign, one of the most successful social documentaries of all time. Schreiber ascribed much of the success of *An Inconvenient Truth* to “a perfect storm” of a popular issue, Al Gore, and a brilliant filmmaker – an experience, he acknowledged, that could be difficult to repeat on such an enormous scale. But there are many lessons to be learned from it, which his company is already using in subsequent releases.

Schreiber described how the film came into being: Al Gore had been touring, giving his lecture to audiences around the country, and when Laurie David and Jeff Skoll saw it, they decided it should be on film and shown to a larger audience. It premiered at Sundance, then opened on only half a dozen screens across the country.

But, he said, the marketers in the meantime had started working with NGOs such as moveon.org, the National Wildlife Federation and others to send out over 10 million emails prior to *AIT*'s opening. Since the movie opened strong, and ticket sales stayed up, it moved to more and more screens. At the same time, Al Gore was willing to “do anything and go anywhere” to promote it. Because of Gore, and the strong word-of-mouth, Schreiber said, the press also found it fascinating and covered the film even in markets where it wasn't screening.

“We helped start a conversation,” Schreiber said. Several hundred thousand “Ten things to do” pamphlets were handed out describing simple things people could do to conserve energy. Schreiber also noted that Walmart was pressured to revamp some of its operations, the House passed legislation, music groups donated money to the cause, and 22 cities vowed to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, 2,000 people have been trained to give Gore's lecture.

“What happened with *AIT* is unique,” Schreiber said. “It can't be replicated. But there are lessons learned.”

He enumerated the importance of setting measurable goals, partnering with NGOs, and involving high-profile people such as celebrities.

As an example, he cites the upcoming movie *The Kiterunner*. The company has chosen to partner with the IRC on a campaign to highlight female illiteracy in Afghanistan, advocate for a bill by Sen. Barbara Boxer, and raise funds for libraries in the country. “We've come up with measurable results we want to meet,” he said.

“Partnerships are key. We also look to foundations to help fund and frame the social action campaigns. And celebrities, even if they are not specific to the film,” he said. “*The Kiterunner* campaign, for example, will also involve the actress Anne Hathaway, even though she is not in the cast of the film.

Gillian Caldwell, executive director of WITNESS, said documentary has a cachet now that it did not have before and it has created a lot of opportunity to motivate people around a broad range of issues. WITNESS has created a kind of YouTube for human rights called the HUB – a website to which people can upload content, human rights related video, pictures, music (with metatags), and connect it to relevant campaigns on the site.

On the issue of partnerships, she said filmmakers can leverage the benefits of strategic partnerships if nonprofits are there from the beginning. “You will have a stronger film if you have the support and knowledge from the people upfront,” she said, including their participation in outreach efforts.

Tom Lennon, producer of the Academy Award winning documentary *The Blood of Yingzhao District*, said that it was important to also consider the major points where agendas are *not* shared between partners and filmmakers. As an example, he pointed to his work on his film and the issue of AIDS in China. Lennon was filming a documentary on unsanitary blood practices and when SARS hit China, the Ministry of Health worked with him on a public health campaign that involved Chinese basketball player Yao Ming. Because of that partnership, they were able to reach 350 million people. But, Lennon made clear, the public health campaign was kept separate from the documentary, and the Chinese government had no control and did not interfere with their film. “One was official and one was not official,” he said.

Tom Lennon also sounded a note of caution into the discussion: “Changing the world is a very complicated thing, the push that we create, what counter push does that then create?” he asked.

Problems can arise between filmmakers and their funders with a social purpose said **Ellen Schneider**, executive director of Active Voice and the TV Race Initiative, if there is too much ambiguity. The funder may think that because they’ve made a grant, it will conform to their message and their program goals. “There used to be independent films and commissioned films,” she said, but that distinction is changing. She also noted that filmmakers and funders have to be clear about the need to repackage films for NGO and educational use. Repurposed versions may not include all the nuances and subtleties of the original full-length film, but should remain true to the filmmaker’s intent.

Schneider noted there is a strong need for guidance on how to work with partners and said she is trying to assemble guidelines and asked panelists and attendees for assistance with the project.

Stan Emert, Director of Corporate Responsibility at Symetra, added the perspective of a member of the business community, with a focus on corporate social responsibility, saying he was looking for a way to partner with filmmakers, but that the inflexibility of the arts community was a turn-off. He suggested filmmakers prepare metrics that the business world could understand, and include business people on advisory boards. He also noted that businesses won’t shy away from controversial films as long as they are transparent.

Patricia Finneran remarked that when partners are deeply involved in a particular issue than a filmmaker is exploring, they have a specific perspective on the issue. But it is often the filmmaker’s independent perspective —a kind of “selfishness” of vision on the part of the filmmaker— that helps to make great films. “So, the more diverse the funding, and the more neutral the early money is, the better, for the filmmaker” she recommended.

Esther Robinson, director of *A Walk into the Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory* and formerly of the Creative Capital Foundation, raised the issue of how the new style of funding is fundamentally changing the way filmmakers practice their craft.

“It’s important to demarcate between old foundation funding and the new style of funding. We’re seeing new funders who’ve made money and are looking to manage their philanthropy,” she said. “Funders like that are changing the art, what gets made now.”

She made a plea for the funders to consider what effect their money will have on art as well as on the cause they are working on. “If you enter the funding world, you have the responsibility to ask what it’s accomplishing in terms of filmmaking. When we look 1,000 years from now, the art that is going to matter is not necessarily the pet projects. The witnessing is the individual and idiosyncratic viewpoint.” Robinson asked funders to think about the question: “What am I doing to impact the entire ecosystem of filmmaking?” as they look to form partnerships.

Measuring Outcomes

Moderator **Jackie Judd** – picked up on Emert’s point about measurable goals, asking the panelists to comment on how to measure the impact of a film. All agreed it was a difficult task.

Ellen Schneider said she looks at the media coverage a film gets, but that as documentaries become integrated into larger social action campaigns it becomes difficult to single out the role of the film. Instead, she thinks it plays a catalytic role by bringing the issue into focus through characters and a story.

But hard numbers remain important, **Stan Emert** said. “We don’t fund nonprofits who can’t count the people they reach,” he said. “We compare the investment to the number of people reached.”

Professor Matthew Nisbet of American University’s School of Communication, laid out several metrics he has identified to use to measure the impact of a film. One way films impact audiences is by activating them to pay closer attention and increase informal learning about an issue – this is where a website is important to a campaign “since research shows that film isn’t a conveyer of complex information,” Nisbet said. Films can also intensify opinions that lead to mobilization, he said, which can be measured on a policy level through increased hearings and introduction of legislation. To judge impact, you can also look at how media has defined the issue since the film has been released and how much coverage has increased, he added.

The School of Communication’s Center for Social Media Director **Professor Pat Aufderheide** and OneWorld.net US director **Michael Litz** noted the availability of many free online tools such as Google Analytics that nonprofits and filmmakers can use to track their impact.

Breakout Sessions

Human Rights – Moderated by: **Kim Spencer**, LinkTV

The Human Rights group talked a lot about the importance of creating partnerships early on in the process to leverage not only funding, but also knowledge from think tanks and other experts.

The group strongly suggested that a code of ethics on such partnerships would be welcome. **Ellen Schneider** indicated that she is actually working with her group to set up guidelines or a model for this.

The group also talked about how celebrities can be enormously powerful, making or breaking a campaign even. They agreed that there are informal “best practices” for how to deal with celebrities that are not being shared among nonprofits and filmmakers and that there are also not enough celebrities involved with causes. Also, since celebrities can take up a lot of time for busy, understaffed organizations, it is important to set expectations for their involvement.

Education/Youth/Family – Moderated by: **Mary Mulvihill**, AED

The group had a good mix of nonprofits, filmmakers, and distributors discussing the issues. What the group noticed was that in the education, youth, and family fields, many of the NGOs are engaged in the content production, and a lot of youth are working on the production, so often it’s about process as much as the finished product. “The process itself has change possibility,” Mulvihill reported. And many nonprofits are helping with the dissemination of this content.

The group suggests that partners clearly define their roles and that trust and transparency are critical, as are the need to recognize the different organizational cultures involved.

Health – Moderated by: **Professor Chris Haws**, American University School of Communication

The group noted that health is a multifactorial issue: regional and socioeconomic, rural and urban, also, wellness versus disease. And health is a local issue, even if biology tends to be similar.

A unique part of health coverage, though, is that funders can actually measure impact in health programming. So, Haws said, health programming is “eminently fundable.” But, because health issues are so local, you need to deliver the message in different ways in different places. So, it is important to think in terms of setting content initiatives up so that they would become modular, multi-language, and multi-use. “Is that what traditional documentary filmmaker want to do?” the group asked. And do funders care?

The group suggested finding a way of enabling local content producers to have tools to convey their message.

Arts and Culture – **Diana Ingraham**, producer of the International Documentary Conference, SILVERDOCS

The arts and culture group discussed how the trend toward turning “art into a tool” may not be in the best interest. The trend they saw was “documentaries as long-form PSAs” as opposed to a creative work “that informs a larger understanding.”

They suggested that artists be invited to join the boards of corporations, if as Emert suggested earlier, artists should take business people on their advisory boards.

The group suggested that it is important to keep in mind diversity and make it a priority in choosing partners.

Esther Robinson told the group that undercapitalization of the public sector for artists, means that artists are at a power disadvantage when they come to businesses or individual donors for funding.

The arts and culture group also wanted funders to understand that a complex message can be good. “Complexity is actually your ally. One of the best ways to insure your message is heard, is to make sure its complex,” the group reported.

Environment – Moderated by: **Professor Chris Palmer**, director of the Center for Environmental Filmmaking, American University School of Communication

The environmental group discussed how there needs to be an awareness of how media made for a global level may not work on a village level.

The group noted that there are now many opportunities to bypass “gatekeepers” and go directly to your audience with your film online, but at the same time, it can be difficult to “cut through the noise” on the internet.

The group discussed the possibilities of grassroots fundraising on the web, finding small-scale donors and not relying on top-down structures anymore.

There was also a desire to be able to make more films offering solutions, not just “doom and gloom.”

Closing

Afternoon moderator **John Bracken**, Program Officer at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, returned to the idea that it might be time to codify expectations for partnerships.

Professor Pat Aufderheide referred back to **Carrie Passmore's** earlier comments about finding common ground to create effective partnerships. "It's not helpful to divide funders vs. artists," Aufderheide said. "Partnerships work well when you're meeting each others needs with your core competencies." She explained that the most successful relationships she has had occurred when she has understood the needs of an organization and "gone to them with projects that I've been excited about and I thought it's something they really wanted to do." She reiterated Passmore's points about the need to manage expectations, be clear about your goals, know your strengths and what you can bring to the table, and go to a partner that can bring another core competency.

Panelists and participants agreed that this discussion of filmanthropy, of filmmakers working in collaboration with nonprofits, raised questions that need to be more fully explored as these partnerships continue to evolve.

Larry Kirkman closed the conference by noting that the day had done a lot to map out the questions. "How we appreciate and support the role of the independent documentary maker is very important," he said. At the same time, "there's no dispute about the value of nonprofit networks" for filmmakers in extending the impact of their films. Kirkman said he was glad to see that the conference had brought potential partners together to see where their strengths intersected, as the film is being made and for public engagement campaigns. He called for respect on both sides for what they bring to social problems and public issues.

He also left the group with the thought that in the near future, the two groups may not be so distinct. "Now everyone's a media maker, and the 20-year-old working at a nonprofit is probably going to be a documentary maker, and where do they sit at this table?"