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NGOs, Funders, and Filmmakers: Jointly Crafting Tools for Social Action Agendas

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Funders, mediamakers and nonprofit organizations have increasingly formed teams to produce highly strategic, often interactive, but still richly storytelling media. Propelling this teamwork has been:

- a combination of new technologies,
- changing funder strategies in which funders have often taken the initiative in designing projects, and
- the awareness of nonprofit organizations that media are central to any strategic objective.

This paper will discuss several recent cases of such creative partnering.

This kind of partnering has been hidden under the notion of sponsored films, which have been the unglamorous although often lucrative side of independent and documentary filmmaking. It deserves attention precisely because of the instrumental use of audio-visual media, because partnerships and technological opportunity are breaking down the neat lines between client and professional, and because of the creativity with which partners are approaching shared challenges. Films and videos form an increasingly large body of tools for strategic communications and social action campaigns, They are underused in teaching and are

rarely objects of academic scrutiny in research and writing, falling between film studies and public relations. Film studies programs focus on feature filmmaking, with sideline trips into avant garde/experimental film and into documentary studied as a venerable form with its Great Men (Flaherty, Grierson, Leacock, Wiseman, Burns). Public relations courses regularly feature analysis of modes such as video news releases and websites, but often treat film and video as freestanding texts, as items to be marketed or promoted rather than as instruments and tools. Technology has shifted possibility and created new social practices. VCRs and DVDs are now ubiquitous, and web streaming creates brand new options. Films and videos that are persusasive and provocative, and that are designed to be tools within a wider campaign, will be part of the opinion-shaping process and of information-gathering.

One way to track the development of collaborative media projects for social change is through the prism of the Council on Foundations Film and Video Festival (http://www.cof.org), curated in the last few years by Aufderheide with the help of a selection commitee made up of Council members. (The Council is a member association of grantmaking foundations and corporations.) This festival reflects the fact that foundations have long found film and video to be helpful tools, partly because of the cachet of the audio-visual form itself, and partly because of the effectiveness of longform film and video in shaping opinion. As well, generations of independent film and video makers--bereft of any consistent public institution, any secure funding base, any consistent distribution outlet--have learned to tailor their expression to the agendas of potential backers. As a result, there is constant experimentation in the use of film and video to accomplish such objectives as: easing the transition off welfare (Ending welfare as we know it[1998]; Legacy [2000]); increasing the amount of foster care (Take this heart [1997])

improving public understanding about crime (The Farm [1998]); promoting public health (Blood lines [1999); The Legacy: murder and media, politics and prisons [1998]); encouraging community development (Holding ground [1996]; Rural America: communities creating opportunity [1999]); and addressing human rights concerns (Calling the ghosts [1996]; Silence and complicity [1999]); Sacrifice. [1998]). The works sometimes tilt politically to a liberal perspective, more rarely to a conservative political perspective. (Political conservatives have vigorously funded point-of-view media, but it has targeted opinion making elites and forums, and favored print with some broadcast public affairs programming.) More typically, these works contribute to problem identification and solving largely within the status quo. This reality is consistent with the history of socially engaged documentary production, except in moments of great social crisis (Winston, 1995; Nelson, 1988).

The Council's Film and Video Festival, featured at each of the Council's three meetings per year, is nearly 20 years old, and dates back to the heady enthusiasm of some funders for the often obstreperous "independent media" of the time and for the vast opportunities of new communications technologies. It has become a selection of a dozen or so key works that represent a range of ways film and video projects are being developed with funder assistance. The profiles that follow showcase some of the strategies used by recent festival honorees. Each provides rich material for discussion and teaching about the subject, the form and the campaign strategies, and each was created with outreach or ancillary documents that students can use or access.

A healthy baby girl is a film that chronicles a personal saga of the filmmaker, which in the long process of creation picked up support and relationships that both created a platform for

the film and set the stage for the filmmaker's next project (Blue Vinyl, with Dan Gold). It chronicles, in an hour-long video diary format, the five years after the 25 year old activist filmmaker discovered she had DES-induced cancer and underwent a radical hysterectomy. The goal of the film is both to tell the filmmaker's story as evidence that personal and domestic life has been invaded by wanton corporate behavior and to encourage viewers to reconceive once-private traumas as public evidence of malfeasance. The style is intensely personal and home-movie-like--the camera goes with her to the post-operative hospital room, to the lawyer's office, to her family's kitchen where her parents are filling out forms for a lawsuit against Eli Lilly. It does not follow Judith and her mother into a dark hallway, but there a mobile microphone picks up the pair's anguished conversation after the mother breaks down and decides she can no longer bear the pain of public view. Helfand's work is a powerful example of using the diary style and personal voice to address public issues, and to urge organized responses to protect the health and safety of families. It is a call to organizing for women's rights, women's health, corporate responsibility, and against environmental toxins, done in confessional form; this use of memoir and personal testimony participated in a wider trend toward the "camcorder confessional" among independent producers in the 1990s (Aufderheide, 2000). This is advocacy driven by the filmmaker□s experience, political objectives and artistic vision.

The film was supported by the filmmaker's Eli Lilly award, some public funds and a sampler of progressive foundations, some of which explicitly funded its outreach. Its production budget ran about $400,000, despite the low-tech camcorder diary approach. A healthy baby girl was shown at Sundance and on the public TV program P.O.V.. It has been used since in a variety of actions involving toxic environmental issues (Kentucky factory conditions, chemical weapons

incinerators in Utah, DES daughter mobilizing). The filmmaker has also developed a constituency for the film among Jewish women□s organizations, which have held viewings and discussions on environmental toxins. The film was used in conjunction with a national campaign to end medical waste incineration as well. Its website (http://www.itvs.org/external/babyg/) creates materials for organizers, and opportunities for DES daughters to have a threaded conversation. Several women testified to the filmmaker and to P.O.V. that they had been prompted to get a cancer screening and discovered DES-related cancer, because of watching the program.

The powerful human rights documentary Silence and complicity by contrast is the product of a collaboration between two women's human rights organizations. It has the stripped down style of an agency report, and was made for $12,000. It has, however, also been immensely and directly effective. It consists of testimonials by women who suffered abusive, neglectful or corrupt and unprofessional behavior in Peruvian public health clinics; the women's frank and poignant face-front testimonies are linked together with narration and scenes from the locations where they charged they suffered. The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy and the Latin American (CRLP) and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM) worked together to investigate the problem over eight weeks, gathering 50 cases of behavior that violated the same human rights declarations that the Peruvian government had signed. The two groups' joint report was issued simultaneously as a video and a 108-page book of the same title, in Spanish and English (also available online at www.crlp.org).

Barbara Becker, CLRP Deputy Director of Communications and the co-producer of the video**,** chose video for its emotional impact: "Human rights reports are legalistic in their

language, and they have to be. We wanted to come up with a way to show the human face of women being abused in Latin America and in Peru in particular." The makers were surprised to find that the women were eager to testify about intimate crimes on camera, but quickly discovered that the women who had already come forward to protest saw themselves as advocates for women's rights, and the video as an opportunity. Operating funds for the organizations paid for the video, and the Ford Foundation also sponsored the first public screening of the video, in the face of Peruvian government disapproval.

The video has been shown throughout Peru to community groups and women's centers, as well as to key representatives within the U.N., to non-governmental organizations worldwide concerned with women's rights, at human rights-oriented film festivals including at the Hague, and to development professionals. Because of the report, one of the key witnesses shown in the film had her case reopened in Peruvian courts; the doctor who raped her was dismissed, and courts are handling rape cases with greater seriousness. The Peruvian government has also agreed to create new guidelines for doctors, to investigate the cases of abuse in the video, to include women's rights organizations in its reproductive health committees, and to begin talks with the Peruvian chapter of CLADEM on improving public health care. Becker noted that the Peruvian government has also chosen to negotiate rather than to have the film screened in public and diplomatic venues.

Rural America: communities creating opportunity (1999) was produced by veteran independent producers, for an NGO client, with a clear target audience: in its case, funders, lenders and policymakers. The 24-minute, $95,000 film features six short-short, uplifting success stories of community development corporations (CDCs) in rural areas from Maine to California.

It was produced by the Stand Up for Rural America Campaign, a coalition of 780 organizations coordinated by the Rural Local Initiative Support Corporation. The goal was to get more resources for rural communities, channeled through CDCs. The Campaign produced 1,500 copies of the video. After premiering it in Washington for members of Congress and other policymakers, it has been distributed to banks, colleges and other decision-making sites. The Campaign traces increased private investment, a new federal program, and renewed Congressional interest to its work, featuring coordinated media strategies.

Some advocacy, strategic and personal film and video, like Silence and Complicity and Rural America, is designed for a particular target group. Other work could reach huge audiences through mass media, but mostly it does not, for all the obvious gatekeeping reasons. Some strategists, and particularly a few funders, have studied how to open up such windows. Blood lines (1998) was one example of a match between a public health agenda and entertainment media priorities. It began, however, with a dream of a couple of teenagers. Jennifer Jako and Rebecca Guberman, both HIV+, decided to make a film in order to share their own stories and gather support for the challenge of living with HIV. They began filming at a conference of HIV+ young people, and recorded remarkable personal confessions of unthinkingly risky behavior; the teens' dreams and hopes for love, marriage, children and old age; fears of loneliness, not being touched, never being loved. The intimate profiles, featuring extreme closeups and odd angles, are woven together in a rapid, music video style.

The two novices approached MTV with their unfinished film. MTV executives in turn went to the Henry J.Kaiser Foundation, with which it has a standing relationship to produce material relating to sexual health. The foundation generally promotes public health, in part

through innovative and creative partnerships with mass media. Kaiser promptly contributed the funds to complete the film, which was first shown on MTV under the title, It could be you. In three showings, it reached 3.3 million young people. On one of the rebroadcasts, MTV viewers could participate in a contest, by submitting a short film or video about how HIV/AIDS affected their lives. Winning entries were shown in the special, hosted by TV star Jennifer Love Hewitt. Viewers could also call an 800 number for a free booklet on safer sex, to talk to counselors, or connect to their local Planned Parenthood office. About 10,000 people called in on the first showing alone. More than half a million callers have linked up with information through the 800 number Kaiser places on the MTV specials, claims Vicky Rideout, director of the foundation□s Entertainment Media and Public Health Program. Since its debut, the film has toured U.S. communities in screenings with discussions. Blood lines' website (www.blood-lines.org) offers visitors short biographies of HIV+ teens, links to other sites, and to other works by HIV+ young people. A nonbroadcast version, oriented to schools and colleges, was made and circulated with funds from The Funding Exchange/Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, which supports progressive media.

Multiple versions of a film or video have become common in advocacy projects for which a film is a central component of a campaign. In the case of Take **this** heart (1997), the primary funders, Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Program, commissioned a range of videos from the same material, all produced by Katheryn Hunt through Seattle public TV station KCTS. The work profiles in an observational cinema style the daily life of a foster care provider who cares for six boys. An inspirational figure, she also faces challenges that reveal the underresourced reality of foster care. The lead foundations, both concerned with family and

children issues, intended the work to promote more attention to and direct more resources toward foster care. The video has a 60 minute, eight minute and three minute version. It has aired on public television, with 30 public stations nationwide each working with local community partners to raise awareness and recruit more foster care parents and volunteers.

Like most advocacy media projects now, Take **this** heart□s Web presence (http://www.connectforkids.org/usr_doc/tthintro.html) has been a crucial aspect of its social engagement. The online Foster Care Project, coordinated by the Benton Foundation (an operating foundation committed to strategic media use by the nonprofit sector) and KCTS, links viewers who want to follow up on their engagement with the problems shown in the film with organizations and provides suggestions for action.

Legacy, a film to be released by HBO in 2001 and submitted for consideration for the COF 2001 festival, takes the related outreach a step further still. The elaborate outreach and linking website (http://legacymovie.com) that veteran outreach organizer Judith Ravitz created, with funds from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Kellogg Foundation, which launched more a year before the projected screening. The film follows an African-American, female-headed family living on welfare in the Chicago projects over the five years after the most promising member of the family, an A student, was gunned down at the age of 14. Over those years, one member leaves welfare, another gets free of drugs, and the family leaves the projects and purchases a home. Funders believed the film--in two versions, one 90 minutes and one 35 minutes--would provide inspiration and provoke thoughtful discussion among similar communities. A year before its first cablecast, it began to circulate within community networks. “I don’t see why outreach even has to be linked to a TV date,” said

producer Tod Lending. Ravitz developed five strategic partnerships with organizations such as the Interdenominational Theological Center, with the largest collection of black churches in the world; the United Way; and police Boys and Girls Clubs. HBO even encouraged community use of the short video before cablecasting the longform version.

International collaborations multiply the problems of working together, but Steps for the Future demonstrates what can get done. The project, funded by several European commissioning editors for public service television channels, along with the Soros Documentary Fund, produced 37 television programs within Southern Africa on HIV/AIDS. All the programs were produced by African directors with Northern mentors and producers; they range from a few minutes to an hour. Subjects include mother-to-baby transmission, AIDS activism, the culture of alienated young people, and problems within public health clinics. Programs are being shown throughout Southern Africa, both on television and on screens, and on European TV channels. The project's strongest bonds were between commissioning editors in South Africa and in Europe, with an investment from Soros as well. The result was not merely programming, but skills transfer as well.

A range of organizations has sprung up to serve collaborations between funders, filmmakers, and community organizations. Some of this activity has been tracked over time by The Benton Foundation, which has developed this focus for more than a decade and hosted the 1993 Advocacy Video Conference in Washington, D.C. Much of its material can be accessed through its website, www.benton.org. In particular, the use of advocacy and point-of-view videos in campaigns and for educational use, with web platforms and study guides, has been analyzed in the Benton Foundation's publication Making Television Matter (2000), also

available online from Benton. The public television series P.O.V. (www.pbs.org/pov) has become a highly valued window for persuasive but not directly instrumental documentaries, since the series features point-of-view personal essays. A related program of The American Documentary, which is P.O.V.'s legal parent, also promotes community outreach for film and video: The Television Race Initiative, funded by the Ford Foundation and others, selects films and videos that are broadcast or cablecast, and constructs a community outreach program featuring discussions on race issues, pluralism and tolerance. It has now also developed Active Voice, a standalone organization to facilitate community connections. MediaRights.org (http://www.mediarights.org), also foundation-funded, is a Web-based clearinghouse for advocacy, persuasive and instrumental video work. Working Films, launched by Judith Helfand and RobertWest, works with filmmakers, community organizations and funders from the conception of a project to create the greatest impact. Gabriel Films, the company through which Liz Garbus and Jonathan Stack produced the moving documentary about life inside the Louisiana penitentiary at Angola, The Farm, has announced its intention to launch Gabriel City, an online forum for filmmakers who make controversial, social-issue films to dialogue and debate (via gabrielfilms.com). As broadband Internet access becomes more generally available, some fledgling information services are using audio-visual elements. The Witness Project, a human rights organization, now posts video testimony on human rights violation on its website (witness.org). The D-word community of documentary filmmakers (www.d-word.org) hosts lively discussions on making and using documentary film for social action.

The same questions that advertisers and marketers ask in the commercial realm are also vivid in this arena: how to assess effectiveness? How to reach target audiences? How to keep

viewers and turn them into actors? With funders, issue groups and organizations driving production of advocacy video, such questions are ever more highly defined from the outset. Evaluation plans are often built into the projects from the start (Schneider & Piersol, 2000). In projects where there are quantitative goals--so many more foster parents, so many more dollars invested in rural community development projects--successes can be charted with relative ease. But even in those situations it remains much harder to measure effectiveness than it is to correlate marketing budgets with increased product sales. Social organizing in particular can have long-term and untraceable effects, as a model becomes important in new ways for new people. Anecdote continues to be prized evidence of effectiveness in advocacy video production.

David Whiteman has suggested that, even in the impoverished research area of media effects, study of documentary film□s effects is particularly neglected (1999). He suggests the need to study process of production and distribution, and the need to track use within organizations and institutions. Social action programs and materials--often accessible, thanks to the Web, as never before--provide valuable material for scholars and teachers to conduct and to promote such research. They are pioneering experiments in expanding diversity of expression in an era when technology permits an increasingly seamless relationship between image, text and voice. Such works have established formal expectations and carved out a place in the history of the evolution of documentary form. They raise questions about information strategies and effectiveness; about authorship and control over content; about the differences between propaganda, advocacy, and reporting; and about the range of expression available and important for a democratic society.

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by Katheryn Hunt. Institutional distribution: University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center Street, Fourth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223, 510-642-0460, cmil@uclink.berkeley.edu. Individual: KCTS-TV, 401 Mercer St., Seattle, WA 98109, 800-937-5387.