

Toolkit

Reel Impact How nonprofits harness the power of documentary film

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Spring 2003

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How nonprofits harness the power of documentary film

by DAVID WHITEMAN

Over the past decade, nonprofit organizations have increasingly made independent documentary film and video projects a central component of their campaigns for social and political change, with great success.¹ In Bloomington, Ill., for example, the Coalition for Diversity

and Reconciliation, a local human rights group, brought attention to the city's hate crime problem by organizing a local screening of "Not In Our Town," a documentary about the residents of Billings, Mont., who stood up for African Americans, Jews, and Native Americans when they were targeted by white supremacists.² The screening spurred Bloomington offi-

cials to post symbolic signs on the outskirts of town declaring "No Racism, Not In Our Town." In a similar mold, the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE), a Greenville, S.C.-based labor advocacy organization, sponsored a series of screenings of "The Uprising of '34," a documentary about

to intervene in the political process. However, nonprofit organizations sometimes struggle to find the most effective way to become involved in the production and distribution of documentary films.

There are three primary ways in which organizations have successfully used documentaries to advance their policy and organizational goals. The most common approach, illustrated by the Coalition for Diversity and Reconciliation and CAFE, is to sponsor public screenings of a documentary related to a nonprofit's current programming.

Beyond this basic approach, nonprofits have been innovative in stretching their range of involvement along two dimensions. Some organizations have discovered the benefits of "putting their name in lights" by becoming involved in the film production process, and then helping to distribute the finished documentaries. Other organizations have moved beyond the usual focus on the general public by showing the films to specifically targeted activist groups and key decision makers.

Generating Grassroots Support

The potential for political impact has always been a part of the history of documentary film in the United States, starting in the 1930s with the New Deal films of Pare Lorentz and the United States Film Service, including "The Plow that Broke the Plains," a film about the social and economic effects of the dust bowl.⁴ Today, groups like Working Films (a national organization that links independent



A film about the effort to strike back against hate crime in Billings, Mont., prompted officials in Bloomington, Ill., to post signs declaring, "No Racism, Not In Our Town." Here, volunteers paint over racist graffiti on Dawn Fast Horses' home in Billings.

and a little-known strike by thousands of Southern cotton mill workers that was brutally halted during the Great Depression. The film inspired the citizens of nearby Honea Path to press for, and obtain, city council approval for a monument honoring seven workers killed in the strike.³

These examples illustrate how social-issue documentary can be used

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documentary filmmakers with community educators and organizers to support social justice), MediaRights.org (a group that helps educators, librarians, activists, and other nonprofits use documentaries to encourage action on social issues), and the National Center for Outreach (which promotes community engagement through public television) are all developing much more elaborate notions of what it means to put a documentary “to work.”⁵

At the simplest level, nonprofits put documentaries to work by sponsoring local screenings of films and videos that raise issues related to their organizational goals. For example, after officials at the national Alzheimer’s Association saw Deborah Hoffman’s Academy Award-nominated documentary “Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter” on public television, they began screening it at local chapters across the country. The documentary, which chronicles the filmmaker’s experiences coping with her mother’s Alzheimer’s disease,⁶ stimulates discussion about the problems of caregivers, and many chapters make copies available to the public through their libraries.

Beyond simple educational or consciousness-raising screenings, organizations also use documentaries to mobilize citizens. One pioneer who has pushed organizations in this direction is Barbara Trent, director of the Academy Award-winning “Panama Deception,” a film about the 1989 United States invasion of Panama.⁷ In 1992 Trent began touring the country, screening her film at venues sponsored by local peace and justice organizations, such as Illinois SANE/FREEZE and the Austin (Texas) Peace and Justice Coalition. She insisted, however, that sponsoring organizations use the

screenings to motivate their audience to act, and the organizations strongly encouraged viewers to choose among options ranging from contacting government officials and local media about their concerns, to joining a local activist organization.

Screenings of documentaries in theaters are not always the most effective approach. Wisconsin environmental activists created a wide variety of venues at which citizens could see Rob Danielson’s “From the Ground Up,” a 1992 video that highlighted the destructive potential of several proposed mining operations in northern Wisconsin forests.⁸ Members of the Wolf River Watershed Alliance, a grassroots environmental group, arranged for video screenings in local bars, relying on word-of-mouth to generate an audience, and then showed up with TVs and VCRs. Interest was so high that bar owners began requesting showings, promoting viewings to their patrons. Alliance members also brought the video to county fairs, churches, and meetings of sporting groups like Trout Unlimited. One viewing took place at a boat and fishing supply exhibition. Additionally, the Mining Impact Coalition of Wisconsin Inc., a charitable organization devoted to researching the effects of mining, sponsored repeated video showings as the focal point of a three-week, statewide tour aimed at pressuring state legislators to restrict mining operations. The tour reached 1,100 people in 22 communities and helped spur the Wisconsin Legislature to pass a bill declaring a mining moratorium.

Mobilizing Group Members

In attempting to widely distribute documentaries to the general public, organizations sometimes fail to recognize that they can use documentaries

to educate and motivate their own members. Many screenings of “From the Ground Up,” including those held by the Green Bay Audubon Society and the Milwaukee-area Green Party, served to educate group members about mining and increase their confidence in speaking out publicly. The Madison-based Mining Impact Coalition routinely gave new members a copy of the video to get them “up to speed.”

Labor organizations across the Southeast have used “The Uprising of ’34” to mobilize the general public as well as their members. The film has played in cultural centers, malls, libraries, and religious conventions, helping to inform audiences about the 1934 textile strike. But it also became part of a regionwide educational process for labor activists and union members. Unions such as the Service Employees International Union, which represents 1.5 million workers (from doctors and nurses to janitors, elevator operators, and racetrack employees), and the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (from apparel and textile workers to industrial laundries employees) have screened the film, giving members a better sense of the Southeast’s long history of labor activism, and providing a counterpoint to public and private attacks against labor organizing.

Collaborating With Filmmakers

While it might not be quite the equivalent of walking down the red carpet at a Hollywood premiere, nonprofit organizations are increasingly putting their name “in lights” by becoming involved in collaborative efforts to produce documentaries. With an eye toward enhanced distribution, independent filmmakers have also become more interested in a “coalition

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model” of filmmaking that involves organizations at the start of the production process. Nonprofit organizations can miss opportunities when they do not respond to expressions of interest. Representatives from Alzheimer’s Associations, for example, have expressed regret that they did not respond to Deborah Hoffman’s efforts to seek involvement (and funding) when she was just beginning her project. Earlier involvement might have allowed them to provide suggestions during the production process that could have made the film even more valuable as an educational tool.

George Stoney and Judith Helfand’s “Uprising of ’34” is a classic example of the coalition model’s success.⁹ The filmmakers solicited the involvement of a wide variety of labor and cultural organizations throughout the production process – and several nonprofits eagerly got involved, helping to identify (now elderly) strikers and locate historical documents. Extensive collaboration continued during the editing process, as the filmmakers held a series of preview screenings of the unfinished film for community groups (such as South Carolina United Action, a grassroots social justice advocacy group). Reactions from these audiences shaped the final editing. For example, suggestions from union organizers led to an expanded treatment of the role of African Americans in the mills and mill villages. Feedback from educators, including the Texas Council for the Social Studies, led to a segmented structure that allowed classroom teachers to more easily show parts of the film to students. The process allowed filmmakers to specifically tailor the film, maximizing its usefulness to the nonprofits; the organizations, meanwhile, had greater incentive to circulate the film.

Other nonprofits have also adopted a similar coalition model. When Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen were producing “It’s Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School,” they collaborated with two national nonprofit organizations: Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.¹⁰ Those organizations have since become the major avenues for publicizing the documentary, through their Web sites and local chapters, and their members have become the major source of requests to purchase the video.

Similarly, local environmental organizations as well as statewide environmental groups, such as the Mining Impact Coalition, the Wisconsin Resources Protection Council, and the Milwaukee-area Green Party, got involved early in “From the Ground Up.”

“If you engage people in production, you are creating your own audience,” said Danielson, “or more specifically, your own distribution network.”

So how can nonprofit leaders hook up with filmmakers? For starters, they can identify and reach out to production companies that have distributed documentaries related to their programming. Nonprofit leaders can also attempt to cultivate relationships with filmmakers who seek their support. Organizations such as MediaRights.org and Working Films are attempting to facilitate just those kinds of connections.

Influencing Government Leaders

While the efforts of nonprofit organizations are most often focused on getting a documentary’s message out to a mass audience, the area of greatest untapped potential is for nonprofits

to use documentaries to reach those who have power and influence. Around every issue, from hate crimes to cancer research, is a core network of influential individuals – experts from executive agencies (municipal departments, state and federal agencies), legislative bodies (including city councils, school boards, and congressional committees), and interest groups.¹¹ Nonprofit leaders often navigate regularly among these types of individuals, and they come to know the players well. They often have a more sophisticated understanding of the relevant policy actors than the filmmakers themselves. And they are therefore perfectly positioned to get documentaries “seen” by the right people in a power network.

This is exactly what happened in Chapel Hill, N.C., where a residents’ public housing council took Maxcine Mitchell’s amateur 1993 video and made it the centerpiece of a campaign to improve their own living conditions.¹² Mitchell’s video depicted the underside of public housing: cockroaches, chipping paint, dilapidated playground equipment, leaking pipes, and raw sewage bubbling from the ground. The council first showed the documentary to the local housing advisory board. When the board’s response was unsatisfactory, it arranged for a screening at a Chapel Hill Town Council meeting. When that showing failed to yield results, the residents’ council sent the video, along with a package of supporting information, to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), prompting federal officials to intervene on the residents’ behalf. The attention from HUD, and the ensuing discussions between town and federal officials, ultimately led to concrete changes in public policy. The Chapel

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Hill Town Council agreed for the first time to allocate town funds for the maintenance of public housing, and it agreed to improve procedures for inspecting and repairing apartments.

At the national level, the Institute for Asian Democracy, in coalition with other organizations concerned about human rights in Southeast Asia, circulated Ellen Bruno's 1998 film "Sacrifice" (which documents the plight of Burmese girls recruited to work in the Thai sex industry) among relevant policymakers in Washington.¹³ The institute also organized a screening on Capitol Hill to educate congressional staff members. A few months later, partly in response to the film, the House Appropriations Committee requested "all relevant U.S. government agencies to focus resources on ... the growing problem of the traffic in women and girls between Thailand and Burma."¹⁴

Attracting the Media

Nonprofits can also use film to influence the media. Activist labor organizations like CAFE used "The Uprising of '34" to increase media coverage of labor issues. Both the making of the film and its later distribution functioned as "news hooks" for sympathetic local reporters. Initial coverage of the film by some South Carolina newspapers, such as the *Columbia State*, legitimated the story for other papers, like the *Greenville News*, which had previously resisted the topic. Stories about the film included language seldom printed in Southern newspapers, many of which are traditionally antagonistic to organized labor. An account in the *Winston-Salem Journal* noted that, while watching mill owners in the film, "One is reminded of the way war criminals look in

other documentaries, smugly rationalizing their behavior, trying to get across their version of history, and failing."¹⁵

The film may have also stimulated a more general change in the coverage of labor issues as well. Covering the story about the film led reporters to seek out individuals and organizations they had previously ignored. Perhaps ultimately, this is one of the most powerful ways that nonprofits can put documentaries to work. As a writer for the *Independent Weekly* in Durham, N.C., put it: The film "gave union members, community organizers, and historians an opportunity to develop ongoing relationships with reporters."¹⁶ General respect for the film's historical accuracy made it more difficult for

reporters to dismiss these sources as mere union propagandists.

Social-issue documentaries clearly offer wide-ranging opportunities to set the public agenda and influence public policy. As nonprofits continue to explore innovative ways to "put films to work," they will become even more effective in achieving their policy goals. ■

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1 This article is based on research supported by grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (grant #00-64036) and the School of the Environment and Office of Research at the University of South Carolina. Findings are based on an ongoing comparative case study of documentaries used by activist organizations seeking social and environmental justice. That study is based on interviews with filmmakers, political activists, and public officials, as well as analysis of mail questionnaires and Web sites.

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