

Building Participation in the Outreach for the Documentary *The Water Front*

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This essay describes how a local story effecting one hard-hit Michigan town becomes part of an international collaborative effort in outreach. Shared authority in the outreach phase of documentary filmmaking is often overlooked by academics and filmmakers alike. As an independent documentary filmmaker, the author uses her documentary film, *The Water Front* as a case study to explore the challenges and opportunities of using new media tools to maximize outreach efforts on a subject of international importance—water privatization.

Cet essai décrit comment une histoire locale concernant une ville du Michigan durement éprouvée est incorporée dans un effort de collaboration internationale de sensibilisation. L'autorité partagée dans la phase d'action d'information sur la production cinématographique de documentaires est souvent passée sous silence par les universitaires comme les cinéastes. En tant que cinéaste indépendante de documentaires, l'auteure se sert de son film documentaire *The Water Front* comme étude de cas pour explorer les défis et les occasions d'utiliser les nouveaux outils destinés aux médias afin de maximiser les efforts de sensibilisation sur un sujet d'envergure internationale – la privatisation de l'eau.

With two-thirds of the world's population expected to run short of fresh drinking water by 2025, water has come to be known as the "oil of the 21st century." (Food and Water Watch 2008)

Several years ago, I embarked upon a documentary film project, *The Water Front*, to bring the controversial issue of water privatization to the larger public. I, like many others, was waking up to the realization that climate change, water privatization, and resource management are not simply the concerns of environmentalists or urban planners but are quickly becoming the defining issues of our times. I had previous experience using documentary media as a catalyst for change, and I was eager to explore models of shared authority and video advocacy to connect a growing and diverse range of groups working on water privatization. What I did not foresee when I began the project were the exploding possibilities that online streaming video venues and networking tools, connected to a Web 2.0 environment, would present for collaborations with subjects and diverse audiences. Web 2.0, a business term coined in 2004 by software developer Tim

O'Reilly, describes evolving trends in web technology that foster participation by treating end-users as collaborators or co-developers; the term is not defined by a particular technology but by an attitude that values and involves the end user (O'Reilly 2005). The following year, 2005, even more possibilities for online participation opened up, with the introduction of peer-to-peer broadcasting, largely influenced by the arrival of *YouTube* and buttressed by the ever-expanding possibilities of social networking sites like *Facebook* or *MySpace*. The influence of the Web 2.0 environment, combined with a growing international awareness regarding climate change and water security, would provide a truly unique opportunity to explore how shared authority can be implemented through a combination of both on-the-ground and online outreach strategies to strengthen local, national, and international alliances working on water and environmental justice.

Despite its positioning within a business model framework, Web 2.0 has generated opportunities and excitement. It resonates with Michael Frisch's definition of shared authority in its celebration of information sharing and collaboration. Frisch describes sharing authority as the "capacity to refine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research, and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy" (Frisch 1990, xx). Getting beyond closed systems of authority and instead emphasizing the value of peer-to-peer information sharing is indeed a dictum of Web 2.0.¹ Frisch has claimed, "the central issues in oral and public history are confronted first and most deeply in practical application" (2005, xv). The same is true in documentary filmmaking and community media as we negotiate and renegotiate ethics, collaboration, and shared authority for every new project.



Fig 1. Director Elizabeth Miller filming Detroit from Belle Isle Park.

Who we chose as subjects in a film and their degree of involvement in research, creation, outreach, and ownership in the film are all critical decisions in what Frisch calls a “process of engagement” (2005, xvi). The potential for participation in documentary filmmaking extends across every stage of production, stages that have become increasingly ambiguous in a Web 2.0 environment where a perpetual “beta” or “always evolving” status is embraced (O’Reilly 2005).

In this essay, I will focus primarily on sharing authority in outreach, an area that is essential but often overlooked by both academics and filmmakers (Winton 2007). By closely examining my own practice, I will explore a set of questions that have emerged from the grassroots endeavour of making and distributing *The Water Front*: How do you develop partnerships in a divided community? How do you decide the parameters of participation with subjects and partners at different stages of a project? What are models for shared authority in documentary media? How do the principles of Web 2.0 translate to documentary advocacy and meaningful forms of participation? How do you develop online strategies without perpetuating existing generational and digital divides? How do you meaningfully connect online with offline strategies of outreach?

The Water Front and Its Origins

In 2001, at a feminist conference in Latin America, I heard a Bolivian woman speak about a water struggle that had left her entire neighbourhood without water. She was not talking about water shortages caused by drought, but about a scarcity caused by a series of political decisions over what many of us believe is a shared common resource: water. Water scarcity caused by economic and cultural oppression is central to the analysis of *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity* which rejects the view that a global water crisis is simply about a shortage of a water supply: “The roots of the crisis in water can be traced to poverty, inequality and unequal power relationships as well as flawed water management policies that exacerbate scarcity” (Watkins 2006, 5). Making evident the connections between environmental concerns and larger systems of oppression, such as institutional racism, is also key to the environmental justice movement and seemed a particularly important perspective to embrace in a film representing contemporary water politics.² The Bolivian woman’s testimony moved me to want to make a film about the intersection of race, class, and poverty in water struggles and I travelled to cities in Africa, Latin America, and North America to find a story to anchor the issue. The story that stopped me in my tracks was a crisis playing out in Highland Park, Michigan, a city on the verge of turning its water system over to private management.



Fig 2. Director Elizabeth Miller on location in Highland Park.

Highland Park is a small post-industrial city with a predominately African-American population and a soulful past, known by many as the birthplace of Henry Ford's assembly line and neighbour to Michael Moore's post-industrial hometown, Flint, Michigan. I visited Highland Park in 2002 after learning that residents were receiving water bills as high as \$10,000 and that almost half of the city's homes had experienced a water shut-off. Here was a city located next to the largest freshwater supply in the world, and residents were without water. The setting was ideal to explore how a scarcity defined by politics and power relations was being played out in a North American context. As a filmmaker, I have made it a priority to represent not only the complexity of a given crisis but also the creative response to a situation. Central to my decision to tell the Highland Park story were the strong and diverse individuals I met on my first visit to the city. I met a group of older female activists who were taking a stand on the situation and whose political education went back to the civil rights movement. At the peak of the car industry they were labour organizers; when the industry left they became welfare organizers. These seasoned residents now saw water as the civil rights issue of our times. On this same visit, I met water workers Tom White and Gloria Pogue, who were working non-stop managing a once glorious water plant. I also met the emergency financial manager who had been brought to Highland Park to find a solution to the city's financial crisis and was introducing a set of controversial new water policies, including increased water rates, new strict penalties for unpaid bills, and plans to privatize the water plant. The manager, a corporate accountant

by profession, agreed to share her perspective on the situation and introduced me to her corporate team. After meeting these individuals, who represented very different responses to the crisis, I realized Highland Park was the place to tell a North American story about water, democracy, and difficult decisions. Through the portrait of this small city, I hoped to shed light on a complicated situation and raise some key questions relevant to Highland Park residents and to residents around the world: How do consultants or even local leaders determine what is best for a community? What does private investment in a water system really mean for residents, for water workers, and for a community? Is water privatization a sustainable solution? What are the alternatives?

Telling the story from these multiple perspectives would permit me to show the complexity of water politics in this community, but it would also present unique challenges given how divided the community was over the future of the city and one of its most valuable remaining resources, the water plant. Shared authority is based on relationships of trust, a clear understanding of a filmmaker's objectives, and ongoing negotiations between subjects, a filmmaker, and advocacy partners. The process is complicated when filming a range of individuals with unequal access to resources and power because of the different motivations and risks involved. For example, some residents were eager to share their experiences, hoping that the film would help to resolve their situation. Others were reluctant to speak because of the shame they felt regarding their financial difficulties. In the state of Michigan, if a person's water is shut off, that home is considered condemned and residents can then lose custody of any minor children to local welfare authorities. The workers at the water plant were concerned that by sharing their opinions about the financial manager's privatization plans, they might lose their jobs. The financial management team was seeking understanding and acknowledgement of the challenges they faced in attempting to remedy problems that had been accumulating for years, such as outdated facilities and poor management. I had a responsibility to present the managers' positions with accuracy and respect despite the unpopularity of the measures they were taking. I wanted to provide a balanced perspective, but in this particular crisis the long-term residents and the workers were in far more precarious situations than the management team. An additional concern was that, like the corporate consultants who had been sent in, I was an outsider to the community despite the fact that I had grown up in Baltimore, a city that shares many of the larger economic issues confronting Highland Park.

Making *The Water Front* was often like walking a narrow tightrope as I attempted to balance different and sometimes competing ethical concerns. I had personally assumed the responsibility of making a documentary that would

contribute to ongoing international debates about water privatization and environmental justice. I hoped the film would be a useful advocacy tool for organizers and communities facing similar situations. I felt a responsibility to future audiences who would want to understand the “full story” through a wide range of perspectives on the situation. I also had a professional responsibility to adhere to the standards of documentary practice, which are by no means uniform, but for me are grounded in accuracy, a respect for the individuals involved, and the ability to structure a coherent narrative. Finally, I had a responsibility to each of the subjects who had agreed to be in the film, despite my own pre-existing personal and political convictions regarding privatization and environmental justice. For example, I did not necessarily agree with the strategies employed by the managers, and I did not see myself as a neutral observer to the unfolding crisis. That said, the problems the city was facing were structural, and I wanted to represent their respective challenges fairly.³ As a filmmaker with the goal of fostering dialogue, I wanted to be sure I did not further exacerbate existing gaps in communication between the workers, residents, community organizers, and corporate managers. My challenge was to avoid fueling the conflict, which sometimes makes for good storytelling but not for dialogue or problem-solving.

I was eager to build partnerships within Highland Park to ensure that the film would be a useful advocacy tool, but at the same time I did not want to compromise the access I had been granted from all sides. I quickly developed close relationships with the residents and community organizers, who were eager to use a film in their organizing work, but I was concerned that by developing advocacy partners too early in the process I would alienate the management team, governmental officials, or less organized members of the community. Given the degree of mistrust between the community and the managers, it was not easy to balance my desire to forge alliances with the need to stay open to all sides of the story. This was complicated by the fact that Highland Park is a small city, and nothing I did went unnoticed. The answer to many of my concerns came to me in the third year of filming when Curt Smith, who had briefly worked as an urban planner for Highland Park under the administration of the emergency financial team, came on as an associate producer of the film. As a long-time resident and a former city employee, Curt had experienced the situation from all sides of the story and had gained the respect of the diverse sectors involved in the conflict. He was an “insider” who was not embroiled in the conflict. Curt became an invaluable partner in ensuring that the film would help to instigate dialogue instead of fanning existing flames of conflict.

I followed the Highland Park crisis over several years, and the story and the conception of the project evolved with time. While I had initially conceived of the project as a single channel television-length documentary, in the end it became

a compilation of ongoing documentary projects that would work across several platforms: a feature documentary; a 20-minute educational version; a 7-minute version; a series of video blogs and short films; and a website powered by the open-source content management system *Drupal*.⁴ The project has provided an ideal opportunity to find out how Web 2.0 ideals regarding participation translate to a documentary advocacy project.

A New Era for Documentary and Participation

Making documentaries has been one of the largest growth areas in media over the past five years. The new millennium has witnessed an audience craving reality everything—television, film, and alternative news. The Canadian box office for documentary films jumped more than 400 per cent from 2003 to 2004. (Lacey 2006)

The popularity of non-fiction films and advancements in the digital revolution have generated a lot of excitement and opportunities for independent filmmakers. This excitement is combined with a growing thirst for material that addresses global concerns, such as global warming and an impending food and water crisis. If documentary is indeed “the new independent film,” that development has given low-budget independent documentary filmmakers like myself increased opportunities to reach audiences, as well as some new funding opportunities to do that work. Al Gore’s environmental film *An Inconvenient Truth*, had a budget and an outreach plan far beyond what most of us could ever expect.⁵ That project organized national workshops, which were free to organizers willing to repeat Gore’s slide show at least 10 times in their community. They developed a host of strategic alliances with groups ranging from evangelical leaders to environmental groups like the Sierra Club. For example, approximately 300,000 Sierra Club members received “robo-calls”—a 38-second, pre-recorded message from Al Gore encouraging members to see the film (Snyder 2006). The film’s success signalled to environmental foundations the role a film can play in bringing an issue to the general public, and this has contributed to a growing trend of funding for outreach efforts by private foundations. Funding agencies, filmmakers, and non-profits are connecting to the creative ways documentary films can influence a range of audiences. For example, even though *The Water Front* was made on an extremely low budget, I have already raised more money for outreach than I raised for production. The growing interest in strategic outreach, complemented by innovations in technology, has facilitated new forums for documentary filmmakers to experiment and share strategies. It is more and more common for a filmmaker

to maintain an active web presence that not only keeps audiences informed and connected but becomes a useful template for other filmmakers creating online resources. Social networking sites like *Facebook* or *MySpace* have helped filmmakers with non-existent budgets get the word out and practise “green codes” that promote environmentally friendly practices within the film industry.⁶

The consolidation of theatre venues and the shrinking of public television budgets have diminished the already limited opportunities for independent documentary filmmakers like myself (Jenkins 2006). At the same time, the Internet has provided a welcome alternative to an increasingly narrow avenue of traditional distribution outlets. Many filmmakers are sidestepping former “gatekeepers” by independently distributing their work on DVDs, on streaming media venues, and through direct downloads. One increasingly popular trend is to provide free content online in exchange for exposure and the cultivation of a loyal fan base. For example, Michael Moore offered his newest film, *Slacker Uprising*, for free for three weeks as a “gift to fans” (*MichaelMoore.com* 2008).

Peter Broderick, a writer and consultant for independent filmmakers, explains how the Internet has expanded possibilities for distribution and audience interactions alike:

Today's filmmakers have an unprecedented opportunity to build and nurture a personal audience. Thanks to the Internet, filmmakers can have a much more direct connection to a personal audience made up of individuals they can communicate with. This audience is built one at a time. (Broderick 2008, 6)

Broderick's analysis rings true with my own experience in distributing *The Water Front*. Following screenings of the film, audience members frequently send me ideas for additional screening venues and potential collaborations. Broderick distinguishes a personal audience from a general audience (one that is cultivated through national press and broadcasts) and a core audience (which includes groups that would naturally gravitate towards a film) (2008). For example, the core audience of *The Water Front* would include Highland Park and Detroit residents, water activists, poverty activists, and urban planners. Broderick explains that many filmmakers unwisely assume that their core audiences are a given and focus their resources and efforts on attracting a general audience (2008). I agree with Broderick's advice that it is essential to work with core audiences that can be cultivated through strategic partnerships, and that through them we can tap into more general audiences. Even at the height of the documentary's popularity, we cannot take any audience for granted because the flip side of the exploding number of viewing opportunities is an increasingly fragmented audience base (Jenkins

2006). The well-known concern “I don’t want to preach to the converted” in the digital age could also become “I no longer know how to reach the converted.”

The digital revolution in technology has not only simultaneously augmented and fragmented viewing practices, but as Henry Jenkins explains, has led to new forms of community and engagement:

The new knowledge culture has arisen as our ties to older forms of social community are breaking down, our rooting in physical geography is diminished, our bonds to the extended and even the nuclear family are disintegrating, and our allegiances to nation-states are being redefined. New forms of community are emerging, however: these new communities are defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. (Jenkins 2006, 27)

The potential to connect to the kind of online communities that Jenkins describes has generated much excitement because of the ability to involve collaborators from all over the world, to respond quickly and efficiently, and to work with technologies whose architectures invite participation.⁷ In co-ordinating outreach around a global situation like water privatization, online engagement is exciting and useful. At the same time, Jenkins explains that affiliations within these new communities are often temporary or tactical. New forms of online engagement do not replace tried and true approaches to on-the-ground engagement, especially when working with a low-income or older population. Despite increasing digital literacy, the gap between individuals or groups with access to digital technology and those without still runs deep in Highland Park and around the world. The challenge in outreach becomes how to sustain connections within online communities and how to connect online to on-the-ground efforts in a meaningful way.

Another challenge doing outreach in a Web 2.0 environment is the growing corporate presence in online venues. In the absence of an old guard of “gatekeepers,” the marketplace has stepped in, and while the corporate presence is often subtle, it is also unsettling. For example, on the progressive social networking site *About Us* I set up a wiki page to gain exposure for outreach. The site was free, but I soon noticed advertisements for bottled water, undermining my message of promoting water as a right over a commodity.⁸ In addition to contributing to mixed messages, the marketplace has also led to an over-use of words like “community” and “engagement.” While 2006 was the year of peer-to-peer broadcasting, it was also a year of sales. *YouTube* was sold for US\$1.65 billion to Internet giant Google. What the young founders sold is their “community” of visitors. The sale in itself is not surprising, but in the process, the “community” turns into commerce and

the participant into a consumer. These acquisitions have blurred the boundary between collaboration and “fan labour,” a term that describes the productive and creative activities assumed by fans actively engaged in promotion work. Fan labour is the kind of participation that companies want to foster and monetize, and may serve the company more than it serves the user. Nestled in the fine print of many of these former “community” sites are disconcerting copyright policies about who owns the material uploaded on the sites. Increased exposure and the potential for new audiences are ripe with contradictions. Terms like participation, partnership, and collaboration are employed as frequently by corporate investors as they are by educators/activists, and as a result are at risk of losing relevance. The possibilities for new funding sources, new audiences, new venues, and new models to engage audiences are exciting, but they present as many challenges as they do opportunities.

Guiding Principles around “Shared Authority” and “Engagement”

There is a long-established practice of sharing authority in documentary media. My own approach to documentary is influenced by my background in participatory action research, video advocacy, and community media. While there is no template for ethical filmmaking, subject/audience involvement, or outreach, over the years I have borrowed and adapted strategies from media projects developed by groups such as Puntos de Encuentro, Witness, and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). I will discuss these projects briefly before describing the specific strategies that I employed in the production and distribution for *The Water Front* project.

Sexto Sentido: Early Precedents of Flexible Formats, Fan Participation and Networking Strategies

My decision to develop *The Water Front* as a collection of flexible media formats was not only influenced by new and innovative trends in a Web 2.0 environment but also by the practices of a communication project featured in my last documentary, *Novela, Novela*. The film profiles a Nicaraguan social soap opera, *Sexto Sentido*, developed by the Nicaraguan non-profit organization Puntos de Encuentro, whose mission is to use communication projects strategically to raise awareness regarding the rights of women and children. Puntos founded *La Boletina* a popular feminist magazine that quickly became the highest circulating print publication in the country and covers issues impacting women locally, nationally, and internationally. Puntos also started a radio program run by and for youth to promote youth leadership. Several years later, they launched an ambitious

television program *Sexto Sentido*, a social soap opera made by and for young people that tackles issues like homophobia, rape, domestic violence, and teen parenting. As the group has developed new media projects, it has also explored innovative means of integrating the distinct media platforms. For example, the day after every *Sexto Sentido* episode, the young actors speak on the youth radio program to get feedback on an episode and further explore issues addressed in the show.⁹ By interconnecting these unique projects, Puntos has created a powerful ripple effect, which widens the potential for debate and discussion within the public sphere. This multi-pronged strategy in a Web 2.0 environment is called flexible formatting, cross-platform delivery, or convergence:

Convergence represents a paradigm shift—a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture. (Jenkins 2006, 243)

With the development of peer-to-peer broadcasting tools, it is increasingly easy to create podcasts, video blogs, or newsletters to build and maintain audience engagement.

Over the last 18 years, Puntos has developed additional exemplary practices, including the incorporation of feedback mechanisms at different stages of the project. The philosophy is that consultation builds participation. For example, when Puntos introduced a 13-year-old character into the *Sexto Sentido* program, the group consulted and shared scripts with 13-year-olds around the country, which not only improved scripts but also led to a particularly enthusiastic fan base when audiences saw their ideas reflected in the program. Puntos's commitment to involving youth in the process of making the series and its dedication to youth empowerment distinguishes this form of fan involvement from other forms of fan labour promoted in more commercial endeavours. Another important strategy Puntos has developed is to engage local and national partners whose work is connected to themes addressed in an episode. For example, when Puntos was planning to launch an episode that dealt with abortion following a rape, a highly controversial theme in Nicaragua, the group consulted with those working on women and health before broadcasting the episode. When the episode was aired, these groups were prepared to respond to what quickly turned into a national debate. Puntos has been developing models for networking strategies based on long-term relationships that predate the more spontaneous and temporary networking taking place on *Facebook* and other social networking sites.

Witness: Narrowcasting and Sequencing

Over the last 10 years, I have collaborated with Witness, a non-profit organization based in New York City whose mandate is to provide in-depth training to human rights activists on how to use media as an advocacy tool in their work. Witness's philosophy is to involve and empower those who are closest to the issue to tell their stories and then help disseminate the work to audiences who can make a difference. The Witness philosophy has taught me to shift the emphasis from "I am making a film about water privatization" to "I am making a film *to* strengthen alliances between groups working around race, poverty, and the environment." Their model of advocacy promotes "narrowcasting," the idea that it is not always how many people see a film that makes a difference but *who* sees the film and what they do with it. For example, I might prioritize getting the film to a limited number of city councillors facing the prospect of water privatization in their communities over getting thousands of hits on the Internet. This is not to suggest that general outreach and exposure are not important, but that it is equally important to connect online exposure to "core audiences" who are in a position to secure sustained forms of involvement.

Witness suggests a strategy of "sequencing," which is to use the momentum or attention generated by one successful method of outreach to open the doors to further distribution. For example, a national news story or a series of grassroots screenings can create a buzz around an issue that will set the stage to hold a private screening with local or national decision-makers. This is a particularly relevant approach when integrating online and offline efforts. Generating thousands of hits or "traffic" is especially important when connected to on-the-ground engagement and agency. Most recently, Witness has embraced the peer-to-peer moment by creating *The Hub*, a *YouTube* for human rights activists who can quickly post and disseminate human rights abuses. For me, the most exciting aspect of *The Hub* is that it will work in tandem with long-term partnerships the group has established over the last decade.

Challenge for Change: Media as Catalyst for Conversation and Advocacy

The landmark Canadian community media project Challenge for Change and its digital grandchild, Filmmaker-in-Residence (FIR), have been at the forefront of using media to spark dialogue, reflection, and even policy changes. Challenge for Change was an initiative from the 1960s, developed between the NFB and the Canadian government, and many of the early projects were used to mediate diverse positions within a community or institution. Social workers were often placed alongside filmmakers in a community to facilitate dialogue and debate.

Katerina Cizek has been the first NFB Filmmaker-In-Residence (FIR) at St. Michael's Hospital for the last four years and has reinvigorated the Challenge for Change commitment to using media for dialogue in the digital age. Equipped with a new set of digital tools, Cizek has not only pushed the potential of media for dialogue, but also has explored new opportunities for subject involvement. For example, she initiated "I Was Here," a two-year photo blog and installation project that gave young mothers with experience living on the street a chance to take photos, share experiences with a larger public, and gain computer literacy in the process. This photo blog project led to *Unexpected*, a video-bridge film intended to break down stereotypes between young mothers with experience living on the street and the medical staff who help deliver their babies. Young mothers spoke candidly on video about the discrimination and challenges they had faced in the hospital and then health-care professionals were filmed as they watched the footage and responded. Having successfully initiated a dialogue between the mothers and the health-care workers, Katerina was eager to push the conversation further. She shared these candid filmic dialogues with policy-makers, health-care professionals, academics, and journalists who came together for the day-long "Hand-Held Conference" that she organized in the "un-conference" model. The "un-conference" model has emerged from the open-source technology movement and emphasizes conversation and participation over presentation. Cizek explains, "The conference is about eliminating titles and hierarchies and making people come together in a non-structured way, where everyone has something valuable to say" (2008). The session was filmed and new collaborators were brought in, including a skilled facilitator and a policy analyst. While many of us acknowledge the importance of combining a screening with a community dialogue, Cizek's project demonstrates that facilitating dialogue is an art in itself and is an essential part of turning a film into an effective advocacy tool. Cizek has integrated previous strategies of initiating dialogue from the early conception of Challenge for Change and has renewed these techniques with insights from online community organizing. Her project uses new technology to involve participants further and is a model for sharing authority in the digital age. The project has evolved based on the needs of the subjects involved, the priorities of the hospital partners, and Katerina's long-standing commitment to media as catalyst for both conversation and advocacy.

Outreach Strategies for *The Water Front*

Realistic Parameters of Participation

Most engaged filmmakers agree that collaboration is essential, but the degree of participation and shared responsibility varies widely from project to project, often depending on time, resources, and technology. Media artist jesikah maria ross, an outreach consultant for socially engaged documentaries, has coined a useful term to describe which she calls “a continuum of functional participation” (2008). Her term acknowledges that every project involves different forms and amounts of participation. After years of facilitating participatory projects, for ross the adjective “functional” is key in establishing realistic expectations of involvement. She explains that before, her approach was to involve everyone as much as possible. Over the years, she has realized that media artists often engage in participatory practices with assumptions about people’s time availability, shared degree of commitment, or skill set. She emphasizes that these assumptions can get in the way of a project’s effectiveness:

In the effort to involve people there is often a limit on how much they can participate based on their resources or what is going on in their lives—and this is relevant for community members, community partners—it’s across the board.... In some cases, people want to be involved but they might not have the capacity and this can become a strain on the whole project. (ross 2008)

She has created what she calls a “menu of involvement” where she asks individuals to identify the degree of involvement and responsibility they would like to assume. For example, some community outreach partners might want to attend meetings, while others will want to make decisions on the overall strategy. She is careful to explain that more decision-making implies more time and responsibility. She suggests that it is important to set up functional roles and responsibilities early on in the project. Her recommendations are especially important when working in a low-income community with individuals who are already strapped for time and resources.

Parameters of Participation in Editing The Water Front

Realistic parameters of participation are particularly critical in the editing stage of a film when key decisions are made in shaping the narrative. Editing is a time-consuming, expensive, and often difficult process that requires more time than most community collaborators have to contribute. Editing *The Water Front* took place over a two-year period, in part complicated by a lack of resources to finish

this expensive final stage of production. Consultation with an advisory board or subjects within a film can help resolve challenges in editing and builds participation if the parameters are clear with regards to what kind of feedback is solicited and how that feedback might be implemented. By defining realistic parameters, it is possible to avoid misunderstandings. For example, recommendations translate to time and budgetary considerations, and it is necessary to educate partners on how realistic it might or might not be to make structural changes. I maintained editorial control in editing *The Water Front*, and I made several trips to Highland Park during the editing process to solicit consultation from the water workers and the community organizers. Their feedback and contributions were always helpful in clarifying facts or concerns, and the visits were important to get Highland Park updates and also to explain why it was taking so long to actually finish the film. I did not show a rough cut to the managers because the governor had asked the consultants to leave by the time I was finishing the film. Also, I had prioritized the community organizers as partners in outreach, and therefore their feedback was especially important to me.

A firm commitment to the use of a documentary for dialogue is essential in the editing room where the desire to create a coherent and dramatic story is often at odds with the need to contextualize a nuanced and complicated situation. It is common knowledge that a lot of complexity is left on the editing-room floor in the creative construction of a film. There were many challenges in shaping a coherent narrative from the four years that I spent in Highland Park, and the most difficult was framing the water struggle within the larger context of a post-industrial American city in crisis. It was hard to keep the storyline on the subject of water when the crisis obviously spilled into many different realms. Increased water rates, new penalties on unpaid water bills, and water bills ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000 were a definite hook for audiences, but explaining how the bills had climbed so high and how this was connected to larger structural problems was not a simple task. Highland Park is a city on the verge of bankruptcy, and the strict measures taken by the emergency financial team exacerbated an already difficult situation. While the managers could have easily become the villains in this narrative, the challenge was to contextualize the structural problems instead of blaming individuals.

Before locking the picture or premiering the finished film to outside audiences, I organized a rough-cut viewing of *The Water Front* for the entire Highland Park community. I was admittedly nervous to face an audience of 150 residents and local leaders who had lived the crisis first-hand. The controversial financial management team had left and would not be present at the screening, which had significantly lessened tensions in the community. The debate following the film was passionate and generated many useful suggestions. A few long-time residents

felt the film represented too many negative aspects of the community and not enough of the city's accomplished past. Others voiced opinions that I should have incorporated the governor's position on the situation and more perspective from city council members.

The questions raised in the rough-cut screening helped to inform the final cut, but there were some suggestions that were impossible to include. For example, I had been warned in other test screenings that too much context about the city's past and the financial crisis would sidetrack the water story. The major suggestion that I incorporated from the feedback was to replace some of the more shocking footage of a city in ruins with footage that reinforced the strength and pride of the community that remained. I was able to incorporate the suggestion to provide more context of the financial crisis into a study guide to accompany the film. An additional question that was raised in the screening was how the community would benefit from this film and how profits would be distributed. The question presented an important opportunity to address what can be one of the most important ethical negotiations with a community at risk—who benefits and what is the financial responsibility of the filmmaker to the community? In a marginal community, sharing profits can become as important as sharing authority and is a theme often overlooked or not discussed in documentary projects.¹⁰ The question provided an opportunity to be transparent about my hopes for the outreach as well as my financial situation. My explanation was simple. The majority of independent documentary films do not earn profits and like many independent filmmakers, I would not likely break even in terms of my personal and financial investments over a four-year period. Many consulting editors, sound artists, and students had volunteered time and energy to the project, and in the spirit of this generosity, I explained that if there were profits they would be invested in ongoing outreach. I also explained that I would provide copies of the film and educational materials free of cost for ongoing organizing efforts in the community.

What was especially rewarding for me about the public screening event was how the water workers and the community organizers represented in the film demonstrated their shared investment in the project by fielding almost every question. While we were never in the editing room together, the relationships I had developed over a four-year period, combined with the process of sharing early cuts, had resulted in a shared authority. As a result, the workers and organizers used the screening to explain their positions further and to facilitate a meaningful discussion regarding the future of the city they care deeply about.

Outreach Partnerships

My outreach goal in making *The Water Front* was to tell a good story that would emotionally move audiences and make evident the intersections of race, class, gender, and water politics. I wanted to support the Highland Park organizers in their ongoing work and also bring the story to the larger public to serve as an example of challenges other cities might face. I hoped the film would become a resource that would bring groups together to strengthen coalitions including labour, faith, student, civil rights, and environmental organizations. A priority in this goal was to connect student groups to community organizations. To meet my outreach goals, it was necessary to develop partnerships with groups working around these issues. The time it takes to develop relationships and trust with subjects in a film is approximately the same amount of time it takes to develop outreach partnerships. By outreach partnerships, I am referring to groups or individuals who will use the film as a catalyst for change and dialogue.

To explore ways the film could support coalition work, I held a half-day workshop for local, regional, and national organizers the morning after my rough-cut screening in Highland Park. The idea for the half-day workshop was inspired by an “Outreach Summit” model developed by Working Films, a non-profit organization that provides advice on strengthening alliances between filmmakers and organizers.¹¹ A group of local organizers took the lead in planning the event at the Highland Park High School, and while it was an exhausting process to organize the event with a non-existent budget, it also was a landmark occasion. For many of the 15 groups that attended the half-day event, it was the first time they had been to Highland Park, and they were shocked by the situation. The eclectic group of residents, students, faith organizations, poverty groups, and environmental organizations had the opportunity to network and explore ways to co-ordinate their work. The event has already led to several spinoff organizing efforts and new



Fig. 3. Community Organizers, Vallory Johnson (left) and Miriam Kramer (right), Highland Park City Hall.

collaborations. The consultation was also an important chance to make explicit the different stakes involved in ongoing outreach work. For the Highland Park and Detroit organizers, the issues raised in the film were of imminent concern, and many residents are still working to address unpaid bills and the threat of losing homes. It was critical for local organizers to address these immediate concerns before considering how the film could serve as an organizing tool for other cities.

A key community partner in my outreach efforts has been Welfare Rights, a group featured in the film. They created an alternative to the privatization plan called the Water Affordability Plan and have continued to implement a range of creative and strategic responses to the water crisis in Highland Park. Their most recent initiative was to gather additional video testimony from Detroit and Highland Park residents experiencing outrageous water bills and water shut-offs. They compiled these testimonies and organized a Truth Commission for Water Rights. From the commission, they created a report and a set of recommendations that will be sent to the United Nations. Welfare Rights plans to repeat the commission in various places around the United States in their work to defend affordable water as a human right. The film has helped to energize national Welfare Rights members, and at their last conference I provided films to all participants. The film has also helped to raise awareness internationally. Welfare Rights recently won the prestigious Purpose Prize, which acknowledges individuals over the age of 65 making change in their communities. The biggest challenge in our ongoing collaboration has been making the time to consult, which is complicated when working with a volunteer organization that is extremely strapped for time and resources. Welfare Rights attends to individuals in crisis, and they are always on the go. Through trial and error, I have learned to make the most of the time they have to spare to ensure that their priorities are embedded in all of our outreach efforts.

Many of the environmental organizations present at the Highland Park outreach workshop were the result of national partnerships I had developed during the four years it took me to complete the film. For example, when I first began researching the film, I met with Food and Water Watch, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC. Their regional organizers helped to identify communities facing water struggles in North America. While making the film, I shared rough cuts with the group and kept them updated on the Highland Park water crisis. In addition to providing consultation on the film, they were able to provide research and legal support at key moments in the Highland Park's heated privatization battle. Four years later, I am still collaborating with Food and Water Watch, and most recently we have launched a six-month tour of the film to 40 communities and universities around the Great Lakes. The "Great Lakes *Water Front* Film Tour" will support local organizing and help publicize local and national legislation connected to the Great Lakes Region.

Negotiating Timelines

One of the biggest challenges in working with advocacy partners is that there are often different timelines to negotiate. While a low-budget documentary film can take several years to complete, individuals in a film are often experiencing an immediate crisis. It is tempting to want to finish a film before it is ready to meet the very real demands of advocacy partners. Releasing a “preview” version or a short version is one way of addressing the competing needs and timelines between partner organizations and the filmmaker. While making the hour-long version of *The Water Front*, I created a six-minute short that I made available free of cost to partner organizations. This short was selected for an online streaming festival called “Media That Matters” in 2006, a year before the hour-long version was released. The mission of the festival is to connect films to citizen involvement, and the festival organizers tour the short films to community venues throughout North America. One unique feature of the *Media That Matters Festival* website is that next to each video are “action links” indicating resources and suggestions for taking action around themes raised in the film. These links became an ideal way to feature the ongoing work of Welfare Rights and our advocacy partner organizations. The short film provided an immediate organizing tool for my partners and helped me to raise funds to finish the project. It also helped me to understand how audiences and advocacy partners were responding to the film, and helped clarify my outreach objectives for the documentary feature. Many producers and filmmakers advised me against releasing this short for fear that I might compromise our access within the community, which can be a real concern when documenting various sides of a conflict. If the managers, workers, or any residents did not like the short version of the film, they could decide to pull out of the entire project before I finished the hour-long project. For *The Water Front*, I felt that the opportunity to strengthen partnerships at an early date overruled concerns of compromising access. Releasing short segments before a film is finished may not be suited for every project but is certainly helpful in raising exposure of the film as an advocacy tool.

The Water Front short was also selected by the NFB's online community media venue, CITIZENShift, as part of a “Water Dossier,” a streaming compilation of shorts on water privatization and pollution. This web initiative of the NFB features a range of grassroots media initiatives. The shorts were streamed online and simultaneously screened in Halifax, Toronto, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, and Victoria at community centres, schools, and theatres. While the CITIZENShift dossier began with eight films and a series of articles and blogs, it has grown to become an online collection of 41 films about water that can be

used by activists, curators, and educators. CITIZENShift is currently developing resources on water for teachers, and I have continued to collaborate in the development of these online materials.

Flexible Formats and Sharing Attention

When working across different platforms and with a diverse range of partners it is helpful to create more than one version of a film. Once I completed an hour-long version of the film, I made several other versions to foster collaboration with new partners. I cut a 20-minute version, which will be used by some of the 40,000 members of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in their environmental justice campaigns in the United States and throughout the world. I also cut a two-minute short for the Polaris Institute, a Canadian non-profit, which is raising awareness around the politics of the bottled water industry. The Polaris Institute had asked if they could link to my website and I suggested that we go beyond linking. I offered to create a short trailer that they could upload on their website and share with partners. The trailer would highlight scenes from *The Water Front* that addressed bottled water. Online Web 2.0 lingo calls this form of online mutual promotion “sharing attention.” The short highlighted their campaign, while raising the profile of my larger outreach efforts.

Another small initiative I started was to create shorts in the form of video blogs based on screenings organized by university groups. For example, Cinema Politica is a film screening series at Concordia University that attracts between 400 and 600 students to each screening. At the Cinema Politica screening of *The Water Front*, I asked the organizers to share strategies on how to get a large turn-out, and then I created a four-minute piece called *Running a Successful Screening*. The group has posted the short in a range of online magazines and streaming venues, and has shared this short with all of its partner student organizations. The short serves the dual purpose of promoting Cinema Politica’s work while providing sound advice for other student organizers. Most recently, I was a judge for an online student video competition to create shorts on the politics of bottled water; for additional exposure, I offered to include the winning videos on my DVD. During the Great Lakes Tour, I will share these fun two-minute videos with students and organizers to encourage other youth to use video and streaming venues to get informed and involved.

The potential of viral marketing has greatly reduced advertising budgets, but it is a mistake to assume that groups have time, energy, or incentive to spread the word about a film’s outreach. Sharing attention can go a long way in building partnerships and expanding outreach.

Maintaining a Vibrant Online Presence

Maintaining a website, a vibrant online presence, helps facilitate collaborations with community partners as the site serves as an interactive flier, a community forum, and an ongoing interactive archive. A website becomes a forum where a filmmaker can update and announce information, and the process is green friendly. Instead of printing materials in vast quantities, resources are available as individuals need them. In the process of working on *The Water Front*, I became familiar with the potential of wikis to build online participation. A wiki is a web page or a collection of pages that permits anyone who accesses it to modify content. Just like on *Wikipedia*, anyone can contribute content. With the support of *About Us*, a wiki umbrella for progressive organizations, I created a wiki for *The Water Front*. While the site was initially created as a forum to share information about the making of the film, it has evolved since its earliest conception and I came up with ways for users to participate including: “Picturing Public Water,” a public archive of public water in our communities; a “Bottled Water Shopping Cart,” a means to post water prices and politics; and a “Women and Water” page to highlight initiatives of women organizing around water. At present *The Water*



Fig. 4. Website for *The Water Front*.

Front wiki is more a template for future collaborations than a vibrant example of collective online knowledge because I have not had the time to build participation. Step one is to create a collaborative framework, and step two is to find the time, the partners, and the resources to keep the site active and relevant.

Once the hour-long version of the film was finished, I began developing *The Water Front* website using the software program *Drupal*, a free and open-source content management system, that allows an individual or a group to publish and organize information online easily.¹² Adding content is no more complicated than maintaining a blog, and *Drupal* is great for member-based organizations or for running a competition because it has the potential to program levels of access for multiple users. On the *Drupal* website, I have developed resources such as “In the Classroom” and “The Water Channel.” The “In the Classroom” resource resulted from professors sending direct feedback about how they were using *The Water Front* in the classroom. I asked them if I could share this information with others to build an archive of resources, articles, and assignments connected to the film. “In the Classroom” is an example of how a program like *Drupal* can translate communication from a personal audience into a public resource and the flexibility of the program to respond quickly to new ideas and collaborations. My online channel includes interviews from well-known organizers like Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians. As I tour around the Great Lakes, I will also use “The Water Channel” to post video blogs and include the voices of individuals in communities facing water struggles. Open-source content management systems invite collaboration that can evolve and develop over time. Furthermore, creating the project using open-source programs reinforces the method of sharing templates for other artists, academics, students, and organizers working to connect films to communities.

Remix Competition

Online competitions are an increasingly popular strategy to engage online users. To reach youth audiences, I have launched my own Remix Competition in connection with Great Lakes *Water Front* Film Tour, organized in conjunction with our partner organization Food and Water Watch. Remixing, which consists of deconstructing, adding, and embellishing existing audio tracks, is practised widely in hip hop and rap music, and has become increasingly popular as a result of desktop sound-editing programs. I am inviting youth media centres, college classes, dj artists, and interested individuals to remix the *Water Front* theme song “Please Mr. Waterman,” which was written by legendary Detroit bluesman Joe L. Carter. His 1968 song “Please Mr. Foreman” was the trademark of the Black labour movement, and I hope that with the added verve of youth artists, “Please Mr. Waterman” can



Fig. 5. Waterfront – Remix Competition poster.

bring water justice awareness to a youth audience. Integrating a remix competition is important to my outreach efforts on a few levels. On the one hand, remixing has become a subversive practice by Internet users as a means of contesting increasingly strict copyright laws that are intended to limit users' abilities to download, share, and modify found media on the Internet (Lessig 2008). Rap artists like Mos Def and Public Enemy are taking a stand on water privatization, and I hope that youth artists will follow the lead in turning up the volume on environmental justice issues. I am hoping the competition will not only build online participation but will also help youth to make connections between defending the public domain and defend-

ing the right to water as a common good. Furthermore, the competition is an opportunity for intergenerational collaboration between a seasoned blues artist and upcoming youth artists, who are being asked to connect their music talents to social justice, a practice rooted in the blues. I will work to integrate my online efforts with on-the-ground organizing by sending the winning song to college radio stations and by playing the song before screenings on stops along the tour. The success of the competition as an outreach strategy will depend largely on my outreach efforts, and I am working online and on-the-ground to spread the word. Some of the first participants to express interest are friends and colleagues, bringing home the lesson that long-term on-the-ground partnerships are key to any online outreach strategy.

Intergenerational Collaborations

One of the key strategies in connecting online and on-the-ground work is to collaborate with partners whose skills are complementary. It is often unrealistic to think that busy community organizers have time to blog, remix, or create content for the Internet, but through strategic collaborations the documentation of a community in crisis does not need to end with the completion of the film. In the case of new media work, intergenerational collaborations are particularly useful. Participation connected to a class assignment or a directed study provides students with an opportunity to immerse themselves in their community and get credit at the same time. The Truth Commission organized by Welfare Rights was an example of a unique intergenerational collaboration between neighbouring students from The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Welfare Rights, and residents of the Detroit area. The students got involved and received class credit to collaborate with the group. They were responsible for recording the video testimonies, and documenting the actual event, and the short video they created on the commission process is posted on The Water Channel. I also created a short video on this unique collaboration, which appears on The Water Channel as a model for other students seeking meaningful collaborations.

Additional venues for intergenerational collaborations can take place at university screenings, where an event can be co-organized with seasoned local organizers. Having a clear goal of what you want to get from a particular screening, carefully selecting speakers to contextualize the local situation, offering suggestions on how to get involved, and facilitating the event is key to activating audience involvement. For the Great Lakes *Water Front* Film Tour, I have created a range of documents to help students and organizers get the most out of every screening, and these documents are all available as downloads on my website. Finding ways to facilitate on-the-ground peer-to-peer strategies is also important. One particularly satisfying experience for me was a college visit to Bryn Mawr College in the United States. During a long discussion period, I explained how students at Smith College had been organizing to reduce bottled water on their campus, and I asked whether this strategy could work at Bryn Mawr College. A month later, I received an update from the professor who had organized the visit, explaining how this challenge had led to a new student group who were actively working to eliminate (or greatly reduce) bottled water on campus.

Evaluating Impact

Alternative media spins transformative processes that alter people's senses of self, their subjective positioning and their access to power. (Rodriguez 2001, 18)

The kind of transformative processes that Clemencia Rodriguez discusses in *Fissures in the Mediascape* (2001) take place throughout the entire process of making a film and often manifest in surprising ways. For example, I hired a student, Miriam, to edit extra materials for the DVD and to help film student-organized screenings for *The Water Channel*. At one screening, Miriam stopped filming and joined the heated dialogue that was taking place around her. She was using all of the information from footage she had mulled over in the editing room and her passionate discourse moved everyone in the room. After the talk, a professor in the room asked her to come and talk to her class, and she is now talking about making a feature film of her own on the subject of women and water. These sorts of personal transformations are often the most rewarding moments for an educator/filmmaker like myself, but are not always included in an evaluation of a film project. Scholar David Whiteman asserts,

To assess impact adequately, we must evaluate the entire filmmaking process, including both production and distribution and not the finished product. A film's development, production, and distribution create extensive opportunities for interaction among producers, participants, activists, decision makers, and citizens and thus all the stages of a film can affect its impact. (Whiteman 2002, 5)

Alongside my excitement about the emerging possibilities of online outreach is a firm conviction that this form of outreach is most effective when combined with long-term on-the-ground collaborations and partnerships. Using digital advocacy tools is not a substitute but an enhancement of well-established networking. Participation comes in many forms, and Web 2.0 permits us to extend outreach efforts and engage with the unexpected. I recently discovered the new term circulating in high-tech environments: "technology gardeners." These paid gardeners provide and update content for dynamic websites, which require ongoing time and energy. With new outreach opportunities come new tasks and time commitments, and the possibilities of Web 2.0 can often feel as overwhelming as maintaining a huge garden. For me, the challenge is how to join a community garden instead of assuming a local plot on my own, which does not necessarily reduce the work but may broaden the impact. The *Water Front* outreach project

is still a “beta,” a work in progress, and one that has transformed my own way of approaching collaboration, documentary practice, and Web 2.0 strategies. The process will continue to challenge, inform, and revive my notions of community, participation, and documentary as I garden, weed, and harvest from the ever-evolving practice of sharing authority.

Notes

1. Creative Commons founder Lawrence Lessig suggests that Peer to Peer (P2P) file sharing is among the most efficient of the new technologies enabled by the Internet as users are able to spread content in a way unimagined a generation ago. P2P innovations are also impacting academic environments through initiatives such as *Open Medicine* a peer-reviewed scientific journal or *MIT OpenCourseWare* an initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to offer their undergraduate- and graduate-level courses for free online.
2. Environmental justice as a social movement emerged in the 1980s and has grown rapidly in the United States and internationally in response to environmental burdens shouldered by racial minorities, women, economically disadvantaged communities, and developing nations. A key advocacy component of the environmental justice movement is a demand for more participation in decision-making around environmental concerns.
3. I have organized my concerns on a model developed by John Stuart Katz in his article, “Family Film: Ethical Implications for Consent” in *Image Ethics in the Digital Age* (2003). Katz breaks concerns into four categories: 1. responsibility to self; 2. responsibility to profession; 3. responsibility to audience; 4. responsibility to subjects.
4. Dynamic websites distinguish themselves from static html sites as they can be managed by groups and are backed by a user-generated database. Open source software is connected to the free software movement and refers to a more collaborative approach to developing software than the previous more centralized models.
5. The marketing budget for *An Inconvenient Truth* was \$4.5 million, a small portion of what is spent on feature films and greatly reduced because of Gore’s high profile and extensive outreach work. The combined production and outreach budget for *The Water Front* over a four-year period was well under \$100,000—not taking into account in-kind donations and volunteer labour.
6. The Green Code Project was launched in Canada to establish an environmental set of standards within the international film and media industry.
7. One example of the kind of new community Jenkins is describing would be *Wikipedia*, the well-known online open-source encyclopedia. The *Wikipedia* community is consolidated through innovative and participatory processes of collecting information originating from a shared frustration with exclusive notions of expertise and knowledge.

8. *About Us* changed the bottled water advertisements, but because they are dependent on advertisements to generate revenue I learned the importance of checking this regularly.
9. More recently, the organization is employing the Internet but there are still “digital divide” challenges for their youth audiences, including digital literacy and computer access.
10. Sharing profits is not always about sharing cash but can also be about sharing opportunities. I have made a point of passing on speaking engagements and honorariums to local organizers and individuals represented in the film.
11. Working Films helps groups and filmmakers identify shared goals and timelines to build momentum and impact (Working Films 2008).
12. Professor Matt Soar helped design the site, and Jeff Traynor coded and maintains the site. Working with Jeff to explore the potentials of the powerful software program *Drupal* has been an incredibly rewarding collaboration in itself.

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