

Modalities of Impact:

Typological Analysis of Social Issue Documentary and Video

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ABSTRACT

Political communications research into the impact of social issue documentary film and video has garnered significant attention in the last decade. Researchers in media and communications studies, sociology, and political science have begun to focus on the particular intersections of film, video and social change in the context of civil society action. Research by Whiteman (2004) has incorporated models for assessing impact beyond the individual, attitudinal and behavioral effects of media, expanding the focus to mobilization and education of activist groups and agenda-setting for public policy deliberations. Rodriguez (2001) and others in the fields of participatory video, citizen media and media development have developed theoretical frameworks and methodologies for understanding the impact of media interventions at the civic and local level. At both levels the medium at work should be placed in the context of alternative media, social movements and global civil society engagement and deliberation in order to explain not only the extent of impact but also the modalities of impact. This project explores the modalities of political impact of social issue documentary film and video by mapping the spectrum of its utility. Through qualitative analysis, anecdotal assessment and content analysis of case studies, films and video projects, associated outreach campaigns, and following the course of development of the activist documentary film and video movements, I describe how the film medium operates at the level of political impact in different contexts in order to show how mainstream activist documentaries are taking cues from the use of alternative media by social movements, participatory video projects and advocacy campaigns, which reveals a merger of practices, repertoires, possibilities for new genres and techniques and opportunities for future academic measurement assessment. The media landscape, and in particular, the ecological network of social issue documentary film and video exist in a broad spectrum of use by a variety of actors, each who employ the medium for different purposes in different sectors of public sphere and civil society action. This typological analysis of film and video use designed for social change navigates this growing field of research, contributes to the understanding of strategic innovations in political communication, and focuses on particular aspects of the complex relationship between media, communication, politics, culture and social change.

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Introduction

The political impact of social issue documentary films and videos has garnered significant interest in the last decade. Within the field of political communication, research has traditionally focused on media effects rather than impact, however previous empirical studies of political impact of film and video have yielded mixed results. As Bartels points out (1993: 267), “the state of research on media effects is one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science,” opining that scholarly literature has been content to refute and stifle the thesis of media impact rather than supporting it. Furthermore, Bennet and Iyengar (forthcoming) note that changes in social, psychological, technological and economic conditions require new perspectives to guide and restructure future research in the field. The scope of political communication is expanding and is no longer bound to voting behavior, electoral processes, or public opinion. In these changing conditions, power relations, message providers and receivers are being rearranged, notions of democracy and citizenship are being reformulated; people *receive* politics differently.

Filmmakers, activists and academics are seeking new methods to interpret and measure the political impact of social issue documentary film and video. Following academics in political science, sociology, and media and communication studies I have incorporated new methods, analysis, and exposition of contemporary films to conduct a descriptive analysis of social issue documentaries in the context of the globalized media environment. *My research is designed to answer the questions: what are the uses of film and video in political communications? What are their modalities of impact on a given arena? And what do these modalities of impact mean in the contemporary context of global civil society?* This project explores the modalities of political impact of social issue documentary film and video by mapping the spectrum of utility - a spectrum that spans from a concerned citizen capturing a civil rights abuse on a cell phone to the highly produced, theatrical

documentary. By focusing on the utilization of the medium I will contribute to the growing body of work on film and political communication through a holistic approach to the modality of impact. Through qualitative and anecdotal assessment and content analysis of case studies, films and video projects, associated outreach campaigns, and following the course of development of the activist documentary film and video movements, I will construct a typology to describe how the film medium operates at the level of political impact in different contexts, in order to show how the mainstream activist documentaries are taking cues from the use of alternative media by social movements, participatory video projects and advocacy campaigns, which will reveal a potential merging of practices, repertoires, and the possibilities for new genres and techniques in the creation of social issue documentaries and video projects.

Time is always a factor when measuring impact. With these new developments it must be acknowledged that in the rapidly changing technological and artistic environment an exposition such as this cannot resolve all issues linked to measuring impact but what it can accomplish is to descriptively analyze, in depth, the modalities of impact at work today and suggest new arenas and indicators for measurement in the future.

Existing work has often focused on certain categories of films, usually via within-case analysis. The reality is that there is great variation and complexity, not only in the overall media environment but also in the genre and use of social issue documentary. According to Castells (1983) “a comparative study of this kind does not aim to find overlapping evidence in all cases in order to sustain a scientific statement. On the contrary, each case examined should point to a unique and specific facet of the social phenomena under investigation (Rodriquez 2001: xi)” The media landscape, and in particular, the ecological network of social issue documentary film and video exist in a broad spectrum of use by a variety of actors, each who employ the medium for different purposes in different sectors of public

sphere and civil society action. In order to navigate this field of research I propose a typological analysis of film and video use designed for social change, with each analysis focusing on particular aspects of the complex relationship between media, communication, politics, culture and social change.

I expect to find evidence of alternative media, in this case social issue documentary and film, operating as social movement via different structural transformations in a political context, which constitute different impact modalities particular to each type of film and video project. From mainstream productions to participatory video to new incorporations of user generated content, even contemporary models of impact are becoming institutionalized, providing a new horizon of possibilities for the study of film and video in political contexts. The critical aspect of this relationship is the use of the medium as an instrument of debate and critique of an established order that can provide a window into a marginalized aspect of social existence that historically has been exacerbated not only by media centralization but also by cultural and technical innovations and divergences (Rodriguez; Kidd & Stein, 2010). The previous literature, film and video project selection, as well as theory, is interwoven to frame the variation of impact modality in a sociopolitical context which will display the medium's trajectory by mapping modes of impact in different arenas to better understand the phenomena of films and video intervening in the process of social change

Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review: Overview

Documentary film and video began conceptually as an alternative format, which was somewhere between art and journalism, the objective and subjective. Following its course of development it became a medium of activism and as the genre developed, the media landscape centralized and the dominance of media by a limited few became an increasing concern. Alternative media is usually thought of in the context of its use by social movements, but in this context alternative media itself is a social movement; a foundational mediated component to the development of civil society action. Alternative and radical video gave new life to social movements, creating counter-publics and providing new arenas for political deliberation, media democracy and horizontal flows of information, which have become increasingly prevalent for group action within civil society, contesting the institutional norms throughout the course of activist documentary development.

With the advent of new information communication technologies (ICTs) communication networks have merged alternative media with popular culture. E-advocacy and online cyber-publics have become integral to any social movement organization. New media companies and major theatrical production companies have begun to learn from each other and trade-off tactics: guerilla marketing is employed by both sides, mainstream media outlets are using social networking, linking the internet with alternative media strategies, while alternative media strategies are adopting corporate marketing techniques as a component to grassroots organizing. But video and film is a medium that has the potential to synthesize all of these elements, and is able to navigate at all levels, from public to private, cyberspace to real space, and from local to global, as a powerful and significant means of political communication.

Walter Benjamin (1973) saw film, “as fostering a critical testing stance toward experience through bringing the images and sequences filmed right up close, so that they were almost tactile, as distinct from the sacral, “auratic” quality of traditional art’s distanced, reverential modes of exhibition and contemplation.” These qualities of film and video, Benjamin proposed, stimulate audiences to move beyond mere “contemplative passivity”(common to painting or culture) and adopt for themselves the “camera’s actively constructing posture”, which enables a sense of reach, grasp and engagement with the subject matter. The dynamic nature of the camera itself as a communication device is a highly analytical mode of seeing into contemporary culture, “one with the sensual closeness of touch rather than the distance of vision.” He also argued that film, and the experience of it, gradually expanded people’s perceptual thresholds as it emerged as a new technology (Downing 2003). The then, new media, amplified the possibilities for cultural empowerment of vast numbers of people, for energizing popular culture. When the audience engages with a film, in line with Benjamin’s thought, means it invests the “aura” of the object in its gaze with the ability to look back at itself; a reflexivity that is unique to film and video and precisely the reason why film and video remain the most important medium for political communication.

Documentary film and video has always been closely linked to socio-political issues. Before the alternative media movement it was one of the only mediums to communicate the views of the marginalized, the radical, and the Other. Naturally it coalesced into alternative media as a vital aspect of the movement. As a social movement, alternative media gave power, focus and intent to other social movements such as civil rights, and propelled the utilization of media for social change into a contemporary context. In today’s brave new world of political communication, variations of alternative media trajectories operate within

the public sphere, creating counter publics, fostering political deliberation, empowering people with new modes of media production and utilization. Documentary film, one could argue, is as conventional as they come, but it has always been alternative, part of larger ecology and today it has grown more embedded and more complex.

1.1 Public Sphere & Civil Society: Counter publics, Media Democracy & Deliberation

The public sphere can be a vague concept so for the sake of this section the focus will be on the interactional dimensions of the public sphere. This is the broad space of public interaction, deliberation and engagement, composed of multiple publics, counter-publics and the modalities of media impact exerted from within each sub-sphere and their influences on the greater composite public sphere; it represents the organic life of the multitude.

“Public sphere theory can be drawn upon as a means of theorizing the complex mediation between documentary film, ideology and the broader social domain. Although there is considerable academic debate over the boundaries and functions of the public sphere, the development in understanding counter-publics is the most applicable to the process of social change (Aguayo 2009, 48).”

In the contemporary relationship between media and politics there is a divergence within notions of the public sphere. Habermas argued in his *Habilitationsschrift* that “the increasing complexity and rationalization of societies over the course of the 20th century, together with the growth of the mass media, have transformed the public sphere: ‘the public sphere becomes the court before which public prestige can be displayed - rather than in which critical debate is carried on (Habermas, 1989: 201).’ In other words, the trajectory of the public sphere shifts from horizontal communication between individuals to the vertical communication of mass media, which is bound by the influence of state, capital and consumption thus, constricting the space available for participatory communication (Downey

& Fenton, 2003). This notion is based on the rise and fall of a critical public and the move towards a centrally administered society in the form of mass media consumption. The bourgeois, male-dominated public sphere is incompatible with the invention of a space where citizens meet and enter meaningful dialogue on the state of the world as equals, thus in discussing the public sphere and the role of media, it is important to note Habermas' revisions to his original theory, particularly in terms of instances of intentional political mobilization that intervene in the mass media public sphere as well as the development of a counter-public sphere (Downey & Fenton 2003). With this revision Habermas recognizes the capacity for alternative public spheres to contest dominating channels where a "pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public is able to resist mass-mediated representations of society and create its own interventions (Habermas. 1992: 438, Downey & Fenton 2003: 187)."

Within the fragmentation of the public sphere there are multiple competing counter-publics that can be neutralized in this new multicultural marketplace, or polarized between varying degrees of alternative organizations of society. If alliances are not made, individual groups and subcultures can restrict progress of an issue. While it would seem that a proliferation of these subaltern counter publics would lead to a multiplication of forces, this is not necessarily so (Fenton & Downey 2003). In the past, alternative media was largely unsuccessful in "reaching out beyond the radical ghetto (Curran, 2000: 193)," but with the rise of the internet and social networking, alternative media was given a new life force that could facilitate international communication, new modes of mediation; organizational power that could cut across fragmentary lines and unify otherwise disparate forces competing for the same cause. Virtual counter-public spheres at both ends of the political spectrum are now a commonplace entity in the advocacy world. A relative majority of marginalized groups in the

mass media public sphere now have access to effective means to communicate with supporters, the potential to reach beyond the ‘radical ghetto’ and a grasp on influencing public opinion and mass media itself. There is a positive correlation between media representation and social change within the common domain, which has largely been forwarded by work in the advocacy domain. “The combination of creative and tactical uses of communications, emphasizing local and direct self-representation, contrasted with the relentless and anonymous messages of corporate globalization [becomes] a source of inspiration for media activists from around the world (Herndon, 2003; Kidd & Rodriguez 2010: 7).” The overall complexity of the media landscape is now characterized by convergences between mass and interactive media. The destabilization of political communication systems can be seen as a context for understanding the advances and opportunities in this highly technological and integrated age.

While previous concerns have been with counter-publics and definitions, the focus here is on the *interactional* dimensions of the public sphere.¹ Political Deliberation is proceeding into the online public sphere in the “current destabilized environment of political communication.” Within these new discussion spaces, the emergence of multiple civic cultures have the opportunity to engage the public sphere in ways previously limited to a select few:

“In schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates- ideally in an unfettered manner and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion). These spaces, in which the mass media, and now, more recently, the newer interactive media

¹ I have defined this previously (p. 6) as a broad space of public interaction, deliberation and engagement, composed of multiple publics, counter-publics and the modalities of media impact exerted from within each subsphere and their influences on the greater, composite public sphere.

figure prominently, also serve to facilitate communicative links between citizens and power holders of democracy (Dahlgren, 2005: 148).”

In addition to Habermas, writers such as Dewey (1954) argued that the ‘public’ should be conceptualized as something other than just a media audience. According to Dewey (and Habermas), publics exist as *interactional* processes where atomized individuals - consumption machines - do not compromise such a public, nor do they contribute to democracy in the deliberative sense. Interactions consist of citizens’ interaction with the media (the communicative processes of making sense, interpreting, and using the output) and person-to-person interaction in social contexts of everyday life (Dahlgren 2005). The pervasiveness of social media and ICTs have brought interaction into a fluid and complex semi-ecological relationship shifting between atomized, cyber-spheres and mass mediated forms of communication and the typical, on the ground, face to face interactions. In this new relationship democratic deliberation is overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment and nonpolitical networking (Dahlgren, 2005). In terms of structural dimensions of the public sphere, multitudes of counter-publics comprise the deliberative counter-structure. Within this new and changing dimension, Dahlgren includes the advocacy/activist domain “where discussion is framed by organizations with generally shared perceptions, values and goals - and geared for forms of political intervention. These include traditional parliamentary politics, established corporate and other organized interest group politics (e.g. unions) and the new politics of social movements and other activists (153).” He also indicates the massive growth in advocacy and issue politics in the form of ongoing campaigns. There is a broad spectrum of advocacy, from large and powerful interest groups, to social movements with grassroots character; they represent versions of new politics (called life politics’ by Giddens,

1991, and ‘sub-politics’ by Beck, 1997, and Bennet, 2003, spoke of lifestyle politics); these politics exist across the world, in many social atmospheres and in different contexts.

Social issue documentary film and video anchor citizens’ lived experiences, display their personal resources and subjective dispositions, highlighting the dimensions of meaning, identity, and subjectivity in the notion of a broader, global civic culture, which are all important elements of political communication. Indeed different cultures and social groups express civic culture differently, which actually enhances the democratic possibilities of open communication. Civic cultures in this sense are interrelated through the dynamic parameters of values, affinity, knowledge, identities and practices. These are the parameters through which social issue film and video operate as the public sphere is engaged via counter-public means, furthering the democratic communication process and merging social practices, traditions and experiences into a collective memory, whereby democracy is able to refer to the past without being locked within it. The use of social issue documentary and video links civic interaction, both on-line and offline, framed by evolving new practices and traditions, necessary for a robust democracy (Dahlgren 2005).

As we will see, it is easy to exaggerate the extent of the impact but it remains clear that it should not be underestimated, and by further explanation it can be mapped in order to better understand the implications of its position in the contemporary history of democracy.

1.2 Alternative Media & Social Movements:

Following the revolutionary fervor of Central and Eastern Europe circa 1989 there were considerable developments in civil society action, characterized by new social movements. In line with this development, and of its own particular trajectory, were attempts to decentralize the media and increase access in order to effectively utilize it among a broader

citizen demographic. Localized forms of non-mass media, such as community radio, public-access television and ‘underground’ newspapers, began to emerge with varying degrees of success. During this time there was significant growth of non-governmental organizations as well. As civil society groups, they began using small and alternative media as part of their work to intervene in the mass media sphere to change the agenda by a newer, more critical process of communication (Downey & Fenton 2003). The obstacles in the way were obviously the market-led, mass-mediated system and the ownership of what constitutes ‘newsworthy.’ What these new forms of media and civil society utilization achieved was to exhibit an alternative means to bypass the ‘newsworthy,’ providing a more direct flow to a marginalized citizenship that, at the receiving end, was impacted by these corporate & ideological filters.

Global media trends in the mid to late 90’s were diminishing the quality, quantity, and diversity of political content in the mass media. These trends were characterized by media monopolization, government deregulation, the commercialization of news and information systems, as well as corporate norms shunning social responsibility beyond profits for shareholders (Bennet, 2003; Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 1999; Herman and Chomsky, 1988).² In order for alternative forms of communication to encourage progressive social change it must be set in this context of the global dominance of multimedia conglomerates (Fenton & Downey 2003). By the use of new media tactics, extricating itself from this

² “Traditionally, the study of alternative media has been framed by the debate around the democratization of communication and a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The NWICO debate has focused primarily on issues of the balance of information flows and media ownership (UNESCO 1980). Within this framework, alternative media are hoped to bring about democratic communication by counterbalancing the power of large media corporations. Alternative media have been valued primarily on the basis of their power to erode the dominion of a few media megaliths and their unbalanced information and communication flows (Rodriguez 2001: xii).” NWICO was a UNESCO project with the goal of putting electronic media in the hands of citizens and communities who were marginalized by the dominant framework.

dominant context and creating new opportunity spaces for action, the movement for alternative media was able to make socially relevant progress towards social change.

Alternative democratic media strategies can be characterized by groups in civil society exerting influence on the mass media and establishing alternative, discursively-connected public spheres (Downey & Fenton 2003).

“Apart from providing their audiences with alternative information, these new media...were expected to diverge from the top-down vertical model of communication characteristic of the mainstream mass media. While the big media function on the basis of hierarchy between media producers and media audiences, where the latter have no voice and are restricted to a passive role of receiving media messages, alternative media were thought of as the panacea of horizontal communication, whereby senders and receivers share equal access to communicative power (Rodriguez 2001: 9).”

Within this new space one can make the distinction between traditional, media dominated public sphere and an advocacy domain, which is made up of “a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organizations, and networks (Downey & Fenton 2003: 188).” The dominated:dominating binary however, offers little analytic space to consider the role of media itself being utilized as a social movement (and by social movements) that enable counter publics to assert themselves and distribute their message to a wider public. The move towards alternative media practices was an oppositional response to the conventional, mainstream media characterized by censorship, centralized ownership and top down media flows.

While the issue itself is the origin of a social movement, the issue can be bracketed, as it is arbitrary in an analysis of this political communication medium.³ The life force behind

³ Doug McAdams defines a social movement as collectivity acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional channels for the purpose of promoting or resisting change in the group, society or world order of which it is a part” (1997: xviii). Charles Tilly, ensures that the agents of social movements are identified as ‘ordinary people’ who make collective claims upon others and participate in public politics (Tilly 2004). Sidney Tarrow, specify that social movements challenge elites and authorities and he makes the distinction between advocacy groups, which are more institutionalized (1994). Some criteria can be

social movements is political communication, in this case film and video as an organizing, mobilizing, educating and awareness-raising tool. But where does this force come from, from what is it derived? The origin is in the alternative media and its social movement trajectories provide the structure for the new political communication landscape. Rather than focusing on the issue or the social movement connected to it, the structural elements of communication utilized by these organizations and groups can be analyzed as a social movement itself. This movement expresses an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives (Downing 2001). In this sense, the reaction to the mainstream media framework is derivative of the Gramscian perspective, where classes and the capitalist state are controlling and censoring information, and the role of alternative media is to counteract the lies and silence, to open up ulterior channels of communication. Where the hegemonic influence is perhaps most problematic is in the form of self-censorship by mainstream media professionals and other authoritative intellectuals, opinion leaders and their unquestioning acceptance of standard professional media codes. In this scenario, alternative and radical media “have a mission not only to provide facts to a public denied them but to explore fresh ways of developing a questioning perspective on the hegemonic process and increasing the public’s sense of confidence in its power to engineer constructive change (Downing 2001: 16).”

One of the dominant characteristics within the alternative media movement then, is the development of lateral communication and resistance. This approach reframes and contests the systematic, top-down processes of mainstream media, providing freedom for difference, space for nurturing alternative visions and democratizing capacity, where people can develop positively their own strengths and find new ways to communicate and interact

distinguished through these descriptions: (1) Involves collective action (2) Some degree of organization (3) Promoting or resisting social change and challenging elites and/or authorities (4) Temporal continuity (5) Primarily use non-institutionalized methods.

with one another on a more lateral and personal level (Downing 2001). The concept of the audience as mere receptors, of consumers of information is reordered within the social movement frame and the “active audience” that emerges participates in, works on, and shapes media production rather than just passively consuming messages. One of the defining factors of alternative media as a social movement is the merging of audience and movement into the same field of action. No longer are they separate from each other, rather the importance of their interrelation is vital to its development.

“In the ongoing life of social movements, audiences overlap with movement activity, and the interrelation may be very intense between the audiences for media, including radical alternative media, and those movements. Thus the somewhat static, individualized-or at least domesticated-audience is only one mode of appropriating media content. Radical alternative media impact needs to be disentangled, therefore, from the often axiomatic assumptions we have about audiences (Downing 2001: 9).”

Alternative media is, in this view, a social movement because members of the public are generating alternative resources to wield influence over the political allocation process and are characterized by specific tactics and collective action. Alternative media have goals that are independent of what the state might concede, that are closely connected to a sense of personal growth and identity interaction; in other words, it’s most dynamic dimension is that of consciousness raising.⁴ But alternative media takes a step beyond collective identity- it provides a means for similar movements to operate more effectively, offering an accessible dynamism within the mediation of the political process. The alternative media movement is the pulse which gives the political life energy and captures the “burning issues of a nation” that are more often found in and around social movements than in the official institutions of democracy (Downing 2001: 16). The alternative media movement drastically changed the

⁴ Similar to the Feminist Movement of the 60’s and 70’s, where small groups would meet and talk, and explore issues to shake off the patriarchal restraints placed upon them since birth, but without necessarily setting up any subsequent organized project based on this exploration (Downing: 25).

trajectories of social movements by allowing the discourse within the movement to go beyond the movement itself and into deeper networks of communication.

1.3 Networked Media Landscape

We live in a networked world. The transmission model for ‘viral’ or ‘swarm’ communication differs from the old two-step flow from elites to group members in that it is a networked, distributed flow in which the communication format (the meme), the communication technology (personal digital media), and the social contact (network) travel in chaotic yet patterned ways. This is what Castells (1996) means when he references the flow of spaces and the spaces of flows. Time and geography have been reconfigured by the introduction of new technologies and by the changing social boundaries that enable people to construct diverse social networks with these technologies (Bennet 2001: 33). Regarding film and video, the advancements in broadcasting and internet, the audience now has the potential to connect and engage in critical rational debate and community building around the issues communicated via the film or video project (Aguayo 2009: 51).

Changes in late modern society have destabilized the traditional forms of political communication in Western Democracies, Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) summarized a number of these familiar themes:

- Increased socio-cultural heterogeneity and the impact that this has on the audiences, actors within political communication
- The massive growth in media outlets and channels, along with changes in the formats of media output, the blurring and hybridization of genres, and the erosion of the distinction between journalism and nonjournalism
- Today’s increased number of political advocates and “political mediators,” including the massive growth in the professionalization of political communication, with experts, consultants, spin doctors, and so forth sometimes playing a more decisive role than journalists
- The changing geography of political communication as the significance of traditional borders becomes weakened

- The cacophony that emerges with this media abundance and so many political actors and mediators
- The growing cynicism and disengagement among citizens

The “alternative” of today is much different from its historical origins and counterparts. They have been branded and normativized, incorporated into mainstream discourses and have lost their threat capacity once so prevalent in the fight against media domination and communist dictatorships. Contemporary activist and alternative media is quite comfortable in the slick world of corporate broadcasting which is dependent on maintaining a loyal viewership. Therefore the strategy of contemporary social issue documentary and video is to place their projects in major distribution houses for the maximum audience without compromising film content (Aguayo 2009: 23).

The political and social force of the alternative however, has not faded away – the essence of the alternative continues to inspire political and social movements- it has been, however, in many respects absorbed by popular culture through the mainstream media.⁵ Just as popular culture and mass culture interpenetrate and suffuse each other, so too does oppositional culture draw on and contribute to both pop and mass culture (Downing 2001).⁶ The *alternative* as a cultural strand has been interspersed and intertwined within popular and mass culture and as it is too early to predict any long-term effects. We can see the clearest examples within the technological applications of news media and advocacy groups, in the philanthropy domain, and in the relatively new market of microfinance. One wonders how

⁵ : Alternative Culture Now, International conference, April 8-10, 2010; Popper Room; Central European University, Nádor utca 9, Budapest

⁶ A good example is US Anarchist Abbie Hoffman and the commercial publication of his mass market book, *Steal This Book*; also the 1970's TV Miniseries *Roots*, which brought the harsh aspects of slavery to a mass audience – important to note, however that this was only possible through the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 60's. See Downing 2001, pp. 4-5.

this can be seen as a negative, or more to the point, how can we gauge the positives and negatives without a scale by which to do so.

Communication networks are those “webs of interpersonal communication that do not operate through media, even though they are fed by media and feed into media (Downing 2001: 33).” These networks are essential to alternative media as well as social and political movements. In the networked age it is all about the confabulation of the media audience – it is about participation and action within the public sphere by members of these social networks created by new media, who become opinion leaders, trend-setters and innovators of new social media technology. These people and processes are vital in the development of strategies, whereby the networks, action repertoires, and communication tactics are all linked together through the role of alternative media. If the traditional concept of the agora is where the issue exists then the existence of alternative media develops it into something tangible between interlocking circles communicating on many different levels, engaging issues such as human rights, defining the space in which these issues foment and take shape and providing a path for civil society action, counter publics and participatory modes of media. “So alternative media becomes, simply, any media produced outside mainstream media institutions and networks (Atton & Couldry 2003: 579; Couldry 25).” What has this done in regard to film? It has spawned a whole new way of utilizing the film and video medium to facilitate the division between vertical and horizontal flows of communication.

Many documentary films take on characteristics that are a hybrid form of these two roles, in that in order to be seen, to generate buzz, sales and response they must play the game at the elite and top down level, but in order to mobilize, to make their video project or film an effective agent of social change, which more and more filmmakers and production companies are doing rather than focusing on box office sales, is to use the strategies, tactics and

mentality behind alternative media. New documentary films focusing on social issues must navigate this shifting realm and focus in on strategy more than anything in order to boost their films efficacy. No longer does distribution and sales equate impact; it is also about the residual impact felt throughout the communities attached to the project from the ground-up. Alternative media and technology have allowed a change in the sender-receiver communication model; it is more a bend in terms of flow, whereby there are more possibilities for two-way means of communication. Directors, producers and distributors of contemporary, social issue documentary films are wise to this phenomenon and are adjusting their strategies accordingly, whereby the film is but one component of a broader, holistic ecology of interactive media.

While these new developments spark the efficacy of political mobilization and participation there is a backside to consider. That with the emergence and utilization of information communication technologies (ICTs) comes potential fragmentation, polarization and selectivity bias.⁷ The contemporary era of political communication is a combination of global dominance of multimedia conglomerates and the growth of a decentralized, localized form of citizen-responsive media, media used by NGOs and other groups in civil society; these groups have the potential to either exploit periodic crises for the enhancement of political mobilization and participation, or they may be more subject to fragmentary and polarizing effects (Kidd, Rodriguez 2010). Graber, et al (2002, pp. 3-4) noted:

⁷ Whereas the growth of systems and networks multiplies possible contacts and exchanges of information, it does not lead per se to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world and to the discursive interweaving of conceptions of relevance, themes, and contradictions from which political public spheres arise. The consciousness of planning, communicating and acting subjects seems to have been simultaneously expanded and fragmented. The publics produced by the Internet remain closed off from one another like global villages. For the present it remains unclear whether an expanding public consciousness, though centered in the lifeworld, nevertheless has the ability to span systematically differentiated contexts, or whether the systematic processes, having become independent, have long since severed their ties with all context produced by political communication. (Habermas, 1998: 120-1)

“the literature on interest networks and global activism seems particularly rich in examples of how various uses of the internet and the web have transformed activism, political pressure, and public communication strategies....Research on civic organizations and political mobilization is characterized by findings showing potentially large effects of new media and for the breadth of directly applicable theory.”

Right now the numbers don't really say much, but may prove to be significant in the future if we continue the shift away from media effects and more towards a synthesis with impact assessment.

1.4 Social Issue Documentary film & Video: Engaging the Political

Documentary filmmaking can be linked to the motivation to intervene in social change from as early as the silent era in the Russian cinema and the films of Lois Weber, and on through the 1930's, characterized by the New Deal Films of Pare Lorenz and further into the 1970's with feminist documentaries and on up to the development and mainstreaming of independent documentaries in the last twenty years (Whiteman 2004: 52). Film and video have found a home in the context of social movements throughout the course of recent history, characterized by such movements as pro-labor, anti-nuclear, and civil and human rights. As these films increased in popularity they developed their own persona as counter-hegemonic and alternative public sphere agents of change. Such films as the Pullman Porter (1910) and the work by such luminaries as Oscar Michael and Spencer Williams in the 1920's and 1930's are key parts of the development of film and video intervening in the public sphere. Throughout the 50's and on through the 80's the capacity for film to address societal problems led to the emergence of radical documentaries and the independent film movement. Popular influence was pervasive in the radical wing of Jean-Luc Goddard's political films, Joris Ivens' and Chris Makers' film work, the radical neorealist Third Cinema as well as Italian neorealism (Downing 2001). From the outset, non-fiction film has figured

prominently in the public sphere as a powerful means of persuasion (Aguayo 2009). From the synthesis of documentary film with political objectives by Stalin in 1928, to the Nazi party's documentary & propaganda film unit, headed at times by Leni Riefenstahl, with the objective to bring highly aestheticized images of political practices to the masses (Barnouw 1993: 182), as well as the United States World War II 'bugle-call' films which were designed to sell war to potential soldier and allies.

Three waves of activist documentary can be identified (Barnouw 1993; Aguayo 2009), from the mid to late 20's to the present. A brief recapitulation of their scope will provide a necessary historical context as well as lay the foundation for documentary films and video projects intervening in the process of social change. Through the functional developments, both technologically and organizationally, it is clear how the medium is embedded within alternative and independent media as well as a vital element of political communication for social movements.

1.4.1 The First Wave

John Grierson is hailed as the father of documentary film and was very vocal about the medium's potential to intervene in social change. During the 1930's economic and political tensions were rampant. At the time media outlets were dominated by politically ideological content and documentary film was in the margins, culturally and politically speaking. As sound technology developed and was incorporated into production, the medium first entered the arena for social change. The 30's were an iconographic moment, when the political captured the artistic, "writers went left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians and photographers were socially minded (Denning 2000: xvi)." Springing forth at this time were radical movements for abolition, utopian socialism, and woman's rights that ignited a pre-war American renaissance. Grierson traveled the country documenting the

sociopolitical landscape of the American melting pot and observed that social problems were beyond comprehension of most citizens and their participation in democracy was marginal at best. He held the belief that popular media could have the same influential power as the education system and the role of the church, and it became his mission to produce films to help guide citizens through the political wilderness (Barnouw 1993: 85). Grierson's critical approach to the production and distribution of his documentary films was that rather than conceptualizing the film experience of merely consumption and entertainment, he saw potential in the instrumental aspect of the medium. Claiming that documentary film had the potential to change not only the individual but institutions as well, Grierson held that it could improve a crumbling democracy by informing citizens in a certain way that was not currently accessible.

The Worker's Film and Photo League was the first social movement to coordinate political dissent with documentary, as they it was committed to document the economic and social crisis of the 30's. During this wave the documentary film movement produced a prolific body of workers' newsreels and films that brought laborers consciousness to the public sphere, which helped to organize collectives around their objectives. At this time the prime motivation behind social issue documentaries was "to acquire visibility for the people and ideas that were situated at the margins of society (Aguayo 2009: 13)." The consciousness of a democratic social movement encountered modern culture and mass entertainment, which served to increase participation of the working-class in culture and arts as well as to provide a new means to engage the political.

1.4.2 The Second Wave

The second wave of activist documentary began in the late 50's and is characterized by a reaction to an era of documentary that was tied to corporate sponsorship and interests -

“during the first decade after world war II, corporate sponsored documentaries rose to 4,000 a year while news media outlets, dependent on advertising, kept strict control over broadcast documentary film content (Barnouw 1993: 219).” In this reactionary role the filmmakers of the 60’s assumed the role of observer. The films of this period are often referred to by the genre of Direct Cinema with an often ambiguous style, leaving conclusions to the spectator, engaging issues that society at large was content to ignore or be ignored by. One of the most influential direct cinema filmmakers was Fred Wiseman who took aim at the existing power structures in American society, “he selected institutions through which society propagates itself, or which cushion-and therefore reflect-its strains and tensions. All his films became studies in the exercise of power in American Society-not at the high levels, but at the community level (Barnouw 1993: 244).” The documentary film movement in this wave lent legitimacy to marginalized groups, due largely in part to the methodology of direct cinema providing a space where subjects could speak for themselves. It was during this phase of the movement that “the vernacular voice of marginalized communities began to take root in documentary film (Aguayo 2009: 15).” The movement had further entered into the realm of advocacy as the trend was now aimed towards intervention rather than mere observation. Filmmaker-spectator relationships changed, becoming more dynamic and reflexive - with these new developments the medium emerged as a political catalyst of social change.

The cinema verite documentary is characterized by intervention; the very nature of the genre provides a stylistic space where the subject has room to voice previously unheard or marginalized opinions. It was experimental and committed to the pursuit of truth beyond the limitations of objectivity, which was at the time, a radical concept of a medium engaging social change. This development allowed the documentary film to engage another dimension of the public sphere and thereby publicize and intervene in political dissent. The most notable

contribution to the activist documentary genre, was the critical move by filmmakers to direct social change beyond the screening of the film so that the films and were planned in conjunction with political demonstrations in order to further the goals of counter-publics in the public sphere (Aguayo 2009). The 60's presented a new horizon of impact and intervention via film in the form of political dissent. Low cost video technology emerged alongside heightened political crisis, providing new strata of opportunities for the emergent, socially conscious filmmaker to engage. Economic, technological and political developments of the 60's help catalyze cinema verite filmmakers' commitment to intervention in social change and political dissent. New technology created a new species of filmmaker, where ordinary citizens were making films as activists had access to create their own media. "It was the birth of the activist documentary film and video movement."⁸

As media activists were taking on the potential to effectuate social change, the movement became more about democratizing of technology and communication; rather than mobilization around social issues it became wrapped around the objectives of access to electronic media for all (Barnouw 1993). The focus was on access, resources and a community of active participants who were all invested in documenting their lives, worldviews, and particular vernaculars that countered the dominant ideology of broadcast television and political elites. They refused to be passive consumers and moved forward, penetrating into the public space, however the move was more about appearance than about action.

"The political movement of guerilla video was primarily constitutive; concerned with disseminating multiple viewpoints and developing a counter-political community through

⁸ In Deirdre Boyle's book, *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited*, she argues that the activist video movement began with the lightweight, portable, affordable video recording equipment at the upper end of the 60's and early 70's...giving the baby boomers new resources and access to make their own type of television- thus the guerilla television became part of the alternative media movement in efforts to shift the information structure in America.

identity and not necessarily committed to agitational forces that may better guarantee the redistribution of economic resources that are also the foundation of oppression and marginalization. As a result the movement failed to reach its objective of radical social change. (Aguayo 209: 19).”

The guerilla movement proved that there could be a counter balance to the vertical media structure at the time, but the moment was not as concerned with reaching an audience outside of its own activist community. Intervention and critical-rational debate in the public sphere was on the horizon as the movement became less concerned about its appearance and more concerned about creating a space in which viable opportunities for social change could emerge, attract attention and gain momentum towards political deliberation.⁹

1.4.3 Third Wave

The third wave of activist, social issue documentary filmmaking begins in the 1990’s and carries on into the present. The birth of the medium as movement arguably began with Grierson’s contributions to the development of 60’s counter publics. The video collective movements of The Workers Film and Photo League’s objectives developed into the guerilla television movement and the guerilla television movement was “re-born into the activist internet video movement,” exemplified by the most notable and successful activist video collective, the Independent Media Center. The Independent Media Center (IMC; IndyMedia) was founded by a small group of media activists in Seattle in 1999 shortly before the Third Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization. Their mission was based on the assumption that the corporate press would not cover the anti-globalization protests accurately nor give adequate voice to those speaking out against global corporate dominance. They

⁹ California Newsreel emerged out of the counter-cultural revolutionary eruption in San Francisco and the Bay Area in the late 60’s. Newsreel Group was highly political from its inception, capturing and engaging the ideological struggles of the period. However after the end of the Vietnam War and the Black liberation Movement, the organization dwindled and in the words of Larry Daressa, one of Newsreels three co-founders, “it wasn’t self sufficient or serving any social goal. So it was obvious that the organization needed to reinvent itself because we couldn’t continue on the same model (Rountree, 2007: 32).”

sought to provide a grassroots source of news and analysis of the World Trade Organization as well as an alternative to corporate-controlled media. The activists created their own web-based media network through which anyone could contribute, via a new process of open publishing, photos, text and video about the protests which would be posted on the new website. During the week of the conference the website received 1.5 million hits by users during the week of the conference. Using the collected footage, the Seattle Independent Media Center (seattle.indymedia.org) produced a series of five documentaries, uplinked every day to satellite and distributed throughout the United States to public access stations. The success of the IMC sparked the IndyMedia movement and centers proliferated all around the world (Fenton & Downey 2003; Anderson, C. in Rodriguez, Kidd & Stein, 2010). In six short years there were over 160 Independent Media Centers on six continents worldwide. Today the IMC is a network of collectively run media outlets for “radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth,” according to their homepage.

Not only were new media channels and access changing tropes but also new genres were crossing over between utilization and strategies of the alternative movement with the new paradigms set up by the previous waves of media activists. Michael Moore’s film *Roger & Me* (1989) broke from the previous strategies of activist films where previously it had been about battle between activist media groups versus corporate broadcasting dominance, the issue now directly promulgated the struggle. The rise of the third wave coincided with the development of the Internet, which changed the playing field of social intervention and audience. This convergence of communication networks and social movements is best exemplified by the protest of the signing of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by the Zapatista National Liberation Army. As a radical guerilla movement the Zapatistas promoted an inclusive strategy that gave importance to marginalized indigenous

peoples through their use of imagery, sound and narrative that appealed to the participation of the indigenous and lower classes of Mexico. Through public announcements, publications and radical utilization of the internet, the Zapatistas reached beyond their geographic boundaries and published their message and experience to the rest of the world. “The combination of creative and tactical uses of communications, emphasizing the local and direct self-representation, contrasted with the relentless and anonymous messages of corporate globalization and became a source of inspiration for media activists around the world (Herndon 2003; Kidd & Rodriguez 2010: 6).” The third wave, from the late 1980’s to the present centered on documentary filmmaking, video, and new technologies as social instruments. It is all about the utilization of the medium itself, which is has become equally as important as content in terms of empirical political impact.

The development of activist documentary projects, along with radical media has spliced filmmaker (and participants), and the filmmaking process with ideological commitments that extend beyond mere agency. Additionally, given certain conditions, these films have the capacity to be used as organizing objects, strategic mediums that can transform into public action and/or debate. Some scholars in the field of political communication and media studies focus on the content to determine the “activist” element, while this is indeed highly relevant it is not merely about content, and in many cases along the aforementioned spectrum, it is the medium itself and how it is pragmatically put to work within the frame of social movements is equally as important.

“Some documentary films articulate the experience of a marginalized group, which is a legitimate cultural need. However, such labels are fruitless if the film does not actually intervene in a larger public space to create active political agents that will extend and execute the work of initiated by the documentary film. It is not enough for the documentary film to

“be” activist; it must help in creating space for the activism...and producing material and cultural change (Aguayo 2009: 8).”

As social issue documentary film and video intervened in the public sphere, there were more attempts to measure the strategies, impacts and modalities of use within the social sciences.

1.5 Current Methods of Assessing Impact: Modalities

The role of social issue documentary film in the context of political communication is an expanding topic of interest. While there is some work in this area in media and communication studies, political science is somewhat lacking in relevant research. However, political scientist David Whiteman has been developing models to assess the impact of social issue documentary films and their role in grassroots organizations, social movements, NGO campaigns, and community awareness to name a few. Drawing on participatory video (PV) research, citizen media, media and communication studies, and political communication, an overview of the contemporary approaches to analyzing and assessing the impact of social issue documentary can be outlined. The range of theory and literature is broad in order to proceed with a descriptively thick analysis of impact modalities, whereby the spectrum of the utilization of the film and video medium can be mapped from the indigenous community to the Hollywood production company.

While not delving too deep into video advocacy, citizen media and participatory video, it is important to make some distinctions that will provide a basis for the analysis of the contemporary film selection. Video has become an increasingly popular form of communication outreach for non-profit organizations, social justice movements and advocacy campaigns (Caldwell 2005). Documentary and video projects can often raise more awareness and attract more attention to the issue than coverage in the mainstream media by its mode of delivery; an impassioned, emotional appeal, and call to action that energizes individuals

within a community, advocacy workers, and can serve as legal documentation (evidence) of such things as human rights infractions (Whiteman 2004).

In the development community there is the distinction between process and product in terms of the *uses* of the medium. This is an extremely important aspect of social issue documentaries today that seek to effectuate social change. The use of video for community development is distinguished by two categories: video as product and video as process (Rodriguez 2001). The main criterion used to differentiate these two modes of video production is the intended use of the video. While the quality of the final product is the main goal of 'Video as Product', the richness of the production process itself is the priority for 'Video as Process' (Rodriguez 2001: 116).

The Video as Product implies a communication expert(s) or an NGO that is either a group of socially-minded video professionals interested in community development, minority rights and empowerment or the like, who contact a community in order to make a video about an aspect of their socio-political situation. Participation in the production is usually in the form of local informants, either on screen or off. The final product is intended for wide release, a broad audience, such as television broadcasting, public screenings, and film festivals. In this category the technical aspect is carefully managed and the narrative is constructed in line with aesthetic standards of the film and filmmakers in terms of length, framing, cutting, camera angles and movements, site location and acting (Rodriguez 2001).

Video as Process is another matter, usually involving professional facilitation groups or individuals working with the community throughout the production process. Video as process is framed by participatory communication, as a mediated process of decision-making that directly involves community members who actively prioritize their own problems and find the information and resources needed to solve them. It is a process where the people

control the media decisions, the content of the production, as well as the means of production and the resulting material. The main objective is not the resulting material however, but it is the use of media production, which empowers, gives confidence, skills, information and the media tools that are necessary to communicate their experiences and intentions (Rodriguez 2001). These two categories, although derived from participatory video and citizens' media literature are an important delineation in contemporary social issue documentary as the spectrum of the medium utilization becomes more dynamic by incorporating both process and product. Advocacy groups who use video as a development tool and as a mode of awareness-raising with a target audience composed of international organizations, nation-states and third sector actors are on the rise. In this setting video technology serves to educate and empower, and also to serve as a living document that can call to action or call for aid. More and more we are seeing citizen media, merging into the process, becoming the product of a holistic engagement with the medium itself.

Social issue documentary projects focus on power relations within a society by raising awareness around an issue, creating publics for causes and serve as motivational tools for public action, social justice, equity and democracy (Aufderheide 2007). Ultimately the goal is about civic engagement and influencing decision makers to make policy changes that change the course of a given situation (Keim 2009). Yet above all, the impetus and advantage is the medium itself. From citizen and community video to theatrical releases, the power of the medium captures audiences through compelling visuals and in an easy, non-confrontational message delivery format. Film and video projects have great potential for social impact but researchers are at odds how to measure the impact or effects (Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Lenart & McGraw, 1989, Hirsch, 2007, Whiteman, 2001). Feldman and Sigelman's (1985: 577) case study of prime-time television impact surrounding the premier of *The Day After*

found that watching the broadcast increased awareness about the issue at hand (nuclear weapons) and had an empirical impact on opinion in regards to US policy. However, they also found that influence was dependent on demographics, such as age level and education, and that there was significant variation in viewer reaction to information communicated via the program. Lenart and McGraw conducted a study (1989) that focused on audience-related characteristics, in addition to impact, finding that individuals with lower levels of education are predisposed to greater influence through direct exposure to the film. The authors also found that acceptance of the message, which leads to attitudinal change, was dependent on the level of how realistically the issue was communicated (Keim 2009).

The potential for films and video to increase public engagement and raise public awareness is undeniable, but in the social sciences the evidence for this has been minimal. Historically filmmakers have had difficulty mobilizing the public around an issue, and while one may argue that the responsibility of the filmmaker is to make a powerful, edifying film, not act as a leader of a social movement, mobilization in this case equates to an audience and thus attracting a broad audience faces many of the same problems as alternative video movements: failure to reach beyond the “radical ghetto.” Today’s media landscape is fragmentary and characterized by abundance; there is no longer such a thing as a mass audience. So the issue is how to reach beyond the highly interested and invested audience to a broader audience. As noted the current media environment consists of polarized opinions and selectivity bias, where the public chooses their media based on their personal, ideological and political preferences and inclined to ignore other outlets. Stroud’s (2007) quantitative study of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* found that people with more negative views towards President Bush and more liberal political ideology leanings were more likely to watch the film as opposed to other individuals. Considering this situation, Aufderheide (2004) outlines

five obstacles for social issue documentaries. Primarily the problem is that after a social issue documentary has made its rounds on the festival circuit many of them become inaccessible to the public. There are five obstacles to public availability: 1). Rights clearance limits long term availability 2). Contractual conditions pass the rights to third parties who are not interested in publicizing films 3). Access needs to be bolstered by multiplatform distribution such as television, commercial theatres, classrooms and community meetings 4). Social documentaries lack in promotion, publicity, and community engagement 5). Uncertainty of direct-to-viewer publication strategies. Beyond these obstacles for filmmakers and activists, academics continue to struggle with measuring and evaluating impact if, and once the film or video reaches a public.

David Whiteman's work on social issue documentary and video diverges from traditional modes of investigation and measurement. Moving beyond the "individualistic model" of impact, which assesses the impact of a finished film on individuals within the dominant discourse, he proposes a broader, coalition model for assessing impact.

"Investigations of the political impact of film have been almost entirely guided by an individualistic model of political impact...such a model may actually prove to direct our attention to the circumstances under which film is *least likely* to have an impact. At a minimum, however, this approach provides us with only a very limited understanding of the complex and multifaceted ways in which film enters the political process (Whiteman 2004: 54)."

In order to assess the political impact of a project committed to social change the larger political context must be considered, which includes relevant social movements, activist networks, and elites associated with the issues raised by the film. This broader context of analysis may also lead to the evaluation of films potential effects on its producers and the participants involved in the production process such as the groups that contribute to or use the film, and the potential impact on decision makers and other elites who may have

heard about the film. The political documentary has an extensive range of effect and impact far beyond individual, behavioral or attitudinal changes (Whiteman 2002).

Whiteman suggests an alternative model for filmmakers, activists, and academics for understanding, evaluating and increasing the efficacy of activist film and video based on a set of eight points: 1). Use documentary or video as part of a larger strategy; 2). The impact is also on the producers; 3). Be innovative in creating public spaces for viewing; 4). Collaboration with activist groups; 5). Involve educational and cultural institutions; 6). Be aware of opportunities to change public policy; 7). Use the documentary or video to get media attention; and 8). Use the film network for future action. (2002).

This “coalition model” provides a more holistic understanding of the mode of impact. The placement of the film or video in the context of contemporary social movements is crucial to understanding the impact, in that it directs attention to the important roles of activist groups, both in production and distribution, as participants. The film itself becomes a tool for activist groups to use in seeking further political impact and social change (2004). Whiteman refers to a “feedback loop” that is mutually beneficially to filmmakers, subjects, grassroots organizers, audiences and activists. Through this loop, coalitions are created and are composed of individuals and organizations using the film as the centerpiece of connections. Therefore the final product is not the essential goal of the politically engaged documentary film project, but a means to an end, a tool for a social movement via radical utilization of a communication medium.

“The making of a social issue documentary film is essentially an intervention into an ongoing social and political process, and the production may act as a catalyst in many different ways. In assessing political impact, a coalition model incorporates production as well as distribution, activists and decision makers as well as citizens, and alternative as well as dominance spheres of discourse. In moving the focus beyond the impact on individual citizens, a coalition model leads us to consider two [additional] areas of potential impact: (a)

activist organizations and social movements and (b) decision makers and political elites (2004: 54).”

The impact then occurs primarily through these linkages, what Whiteman calls the “issue-network.” Thus a documentary works when it is embedded in this network via links to activists and policy makers on all levels. The depth and breadth of these linkages factor directly into the impact potential of the project. Whiteman proposes that political impact is most likely to occur when at least one element of the issue network utilizes the documentary within the network, either to approach elites, to mobilize individuals and groups, and ultimately towards policy change (2007).

Chapter 2. Mapping the Media Ecology

To better understand the media ecology it is necessary to locate the actors, agents and intermediaries within the network created by social issue documentaries and video. Within this ecological setting there are diverse utilizations of this medium by a multitude of global civil society actors. From one end of the spectrum we have the concerned, engaged, and activist citizen who, with use of their camera phone or digital video recorder captures an injustice, such as human rights violations (the Green Revolution in Iran for example) and uploads the video to any number of the social media sites, often bolstered by its links with networking sites, which amplifies its ability to go viral and reach a mass audience. While on the upper end of the spectrum we have major theatrical production companies that are engaging global civil society through social issue documentaries and seeking to further their impact by adopting outreach strategies characteristic of alternative media, social movements, and grassroots organizations. Within the body of this spectrum there are new media companies, such as Robert Greenwald's Brave New Films and Brave New Theatres, which is a for-profit company with a non-profit arm that is linked to a plethora of social issues, advocacy and activism, as well as a number of non-profit organizations, also using outreach strategies and similar social media tactics online and offline.

As intermediaries, NGO's are becoming more involved in the utilization of film for their own ends by partnering with new media companies to produce their own documentaries, usually tailored to a specific campaign or policy issue; they are also linked with major grant and funding foundations like the Ford Foundation or the John J. and Katherine T. Macarthur Foundation, which comprise another essential element to the social issue documentary media

ecology as a large number of documentary projects require additional funding. NGO's are taking note of the advances in film/video technology in two ways. 1). They see the great power of the medium to effectuate real, on-the-ground change at a communal and individual level, whereby it is all about the medium itself and it's power to change perspective. And 2). They are using new media companies like BNF, to produce their own social issue documentaries to provide current campaigns with a highly effective organizing and mobilizing tool, in addition to raising awareness.

Another important aspect is the distribution networks and film festival circuits, which comprise both the online- and offline elements. Video collectives like Indy Media, California Newsreel and Paper Tiger TV, to name a few in a large pool, are distributors, outlets and creators at the same time and count as a valuable resource to this process. Also more traditional outlets in public broadcasting like PBS on shows like *Independent Lens* and BBC *Channel 4* are important elements. Additionally, organizations like Link TV and similar satellite broadcast stations are a main outlet for social issue films that have both the digital television and online presence. The range of actors involved in this media ecology is wrapped around the pervasiveness of new communication networks and are interrelated in one way or another.

However, it is also about how each of these actors *use/utilize* the medium. Once again, this shifts along the spectrum- on the higher, for profit side, the end product is what matters most. The DVD, film - the product itself is the vehicle by which the social issue is addressed. As we move slightly away from major productions the use is less about the product and more about how it is used to organize, mobilize, raise awareness becomes more of an important component to the social issue campaign; this is also where the film becomes more embedded as a tool for addressing and engaging a specific issue. The distinction is the

difference between social issue documentary and video as product and as process. The opposite side of the spectrum is characterized by use by the individuals and social groups who are directly affected by the issue. As noted, citizen journalism is part of this characteristic, as is indigenous video, usually a participatory video (PV) project facilitated by an NGO such as InsightShare.¹⁰ In this usage it is all about the power of the medium itself and the process by which the film, or video is produced; the process is equally, if not more important than the product.

2.1 Production Companies

Production companies differ between new media companies and traditional media. Brave New Films and Skylight Pictures fall into the category of new media companies that use moving images to educate, influence, and empower viewers to take action in social issues. On the other side is a corporate company like Lions Gate Films, which is merely the bank, and will produce anything from Clifford the Big Red Dog to Sicko. The third is a variation between the two; Participant Media, a film and television production company that finances, produces, and distributes socially relevant films and documentaries. The company is described as politically activist and its films are typically based on current events and topical subject and presented in such a way to inspire viewers to advocate for social change.

2.2 Distribution

Distribution companies again range from both non-profit to profit making entities: From California Newsreel which is a non-profit, social justice film distribution (and production) company; Magnolia Pictures which is a film distributor specializing in foreign and independent films; as well as Beastie Boys founded, Oscilloscope Pictures which

¹⁰ InsightShare is self-described as leaders in the use of Participatory Video as a tool for individuals and groups to grow in self-confidence and trust, and to build skills to act for change. Our Participatory Video methods value local knowledge, build bridges between communities and decision-makers, and enable people to develop greater control over the decisions affecting their lives (www.insightshare.org).

distributes uniquely independently produced films; and on the upper end there are major corporate companies like the Weinstein Company.

2.3 Outlets

Outlets include broadcast television channels like BBC 4, PBS which hosts shows such as Independent Lens and POV; as well as satellite broadcasting channels such as Link TV, which also has an online component with an entire section devoted to documentaries one can access and watch online for free, there are many online sources for streaming documentaries including You Tube, Google Videos, and SnagFilms to list just a few.

2.4 Filmmakers/Authors

For this analysis the filmmaker or author of content is loosely defined therefore I consider an author as anyone who contributes to the creation or elaboration of a story whether through original film or video or by adding significant value to an existing project. This can include journalists, NGO's, the traditional filmmaker, or the owner of a camera phone.

2.6 Non-Governmental Organizations

It is important to mention the NGO is this relationship. NGO's are producing not only news media content but also their own documentaries, often partnering with new media companies. They also are engaged in two main video oriented endeavors: 1). Advocacy video, and 2). Participatory video. These often intertwine as part of the main focus is on facilitating workshops, technological education and empowerment.

2.7 Audience

This is primarily the viewer of the content, but any individual can also perform or engage in any of the other functions. Audience members are also integral to the dynamic

nature of social issue documentaries and video projects as they can host screenings, distribute press material or DVD's, as well as comment on online videos. In this case there is both a passive and active audience. The confabulation of the audience in their generation of, and access to, autonomous media is one of the most significant emergent qualities of the media ecology.

2.8 Intermediaries

Intermediaries indicate organizations that help in the process of both production and distribution by offering resources, linking social issue documentaries and video projects with non-profit, activist, or grassroots campaigns; organizations such as Working Films, Media Rights, Arts Engine and Film Aid; and on the professional side Active Voice. Included in this definition are funders and grant sponsors such as the Ford Foundation and the John and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Chapter 3. Methodology

When considering how to define the relationships within the media ecology surrounding social issue documentary and video, the distinction is between participatory and traditional forms of documentary, and whether the project was aimed for profit (people who authored it were paid) or for advocacy (usually non-profit). I then looked at how the functional aspects, the sturcturalization of these productions, the different elements at play in the creation and distribution of these projects and ultimately what end they served. After identifying the key agents and actors in this ecology I was able to construct models based on their function, role in intervening in social issues, and general purpose. All the models exist simultaneously in the media environment, they often complement each other and are dependent upon one another, while they can also compete with one another, but it should be mentioned that this amplifies the multitude and reach of such projects, which is a positive indication. The following description of film and video typologies portrays a complex environment, ever changing, inherently dynamic and occupied by substantially different approaches to film and video.¹¹

The typological analysis is constructed on an X/Y axis, where X signifies when a film, organization or company either invests more in the production process or the distribution with focus on the final product. There are variations with this distinction as many new media companies (and mainstream as well) are using the final product as a campaign, by which the life of the film becomes resituated into an activist campaign or social movement, thus agents and films are plotted accordingly. The Y axis is straightforward – for profit or not

¹¹ Berkman Center For Internet and Society At Harvard University: A Typology for Media Organizations, by Persephone Miel and Robert Faris, p 1 -11; contributed in the development and conceptualization of these typological models.

for profit, however as I have already mentioned there are new breeds of media companies traversing these boundaries.

3.1 Data & Case Selection

The data for the typology and communications intervention framework was selected from 22 documentary films and video projects, ranging from participatory video missions, video advocacy campaigns, NGO documentaries and both independent and mainstream theatrical documentary releases. Through qualitative and content analysis of the films, their distributors, production companies, related campaign material and existing case studies I collected general information of each film followed by constructing a communications intervention model which I will describe below.

3.1.1 Figure 1: Case Selection, General Information &

| FILMS | YEAR | DIRECTOR | PRODUCER | DISTRIBUTOR | ISSUE DESCRIPTION | PROFIT/NP | THEATRES | FILMFEST | BOX OFFICE REV. |
|------------------------|------|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|---|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| Sicko | 2007 | Michael Moore | Lions Gate Films | The Weinstein Company | Health Care | Profit | 1,117 | 2 | \$36,088,109 |
| Food Inc. | 2009 | Robert Kenner | Participant Media | Magnolia Pictures | Industrialized Food System/Health/ | Profit | 155 | 5 | \$4,556,821 |
| Crude | 2009 | Joe Berlinger | Joe Berlinger | Entendre Films, Radical Media, et al | Chevron Vs. Ecuador Indigenous Community | Profit | 9 | 90 | \$184,198 |
| Countdown to Zero | 2010 | Nancy Walker | Participant Media | Magnolia Pictures | Nuclear Disarmament | Profit | TBD | TBD | TBD |
| Black Gold | 2006 | Marc & Nick Francis | Francis/Hird | California NewsReel/Dogwoof | International Coffee Trade | Profit | 6 | 60 | \$227,105 |
| State of Fear | 2006 | Pamela Yates | Skylight Pictures | New Day Films | Terrorism, Dictatorship, War | Profit | 1 | 10 | \$20,055 |
| The Corporation | 2003 | Mark Achbar & Jennifer Abbot | Big Picture Media | Mongrel Media | Corporation's global preeminence | Profit | 16 | 30+ | \$3,493,516 |
| Wal-Mart | 2005 | Robert Greenwald | Jim Gilliam | Brave New Films | Business Practices of Wal-Mart | Profit/NP | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Sierra Club Chronicles | 2005 | Robert Ray Perez | Brave New Films | Sierra Club | Environmental Issues | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| ACLU Freedom Files | 2005 | Jeremy Kagan | Brave new Films | ACLU | Civil Rights | Non | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Blue Vinyl | 2002 | Daniel Gold & Judith Helfand | Judith Helfand | Working Films | Vinyl-Related Health Issues | Profit/NP | N/A | 25+ | N/A |
| Burma VJ | 2009 | Anders Ostergaard | Magie Hour Films | Oscilloscope Pictures | Civil Rights, Military Dictatorship | Profit | 3 | 30+ | \$123,477 |
| Trouble the Water | 2008 | Tia Lessen, Carl Deal | Lessen, Deal | Zeitgeist Films | Hurricane Katrina | Profit | 15 | 10+ | \$522,766 |
| Born Into Brothels | 2004 | Zana Briski, Ross Kaufmann | Briski, Kaufmann | ThinkFilm | Children Poverty/Prostitution | Profit | 127 | 10+ | \$3,515,061 |
| S.P.I.T | 2001 | Daniel Cross | Daniel Cross | EyeSteelFilm | Homelessness/Semi-PV | Profit | 5 | 16 | N/A |
| Seeing Is Believing | 2002 | Katerina Cizek & Peter Wintonick | Necessary Illusions | Filmopotion/FirstRun/Icarus Films | Human Rights, Handicaps & the news | Profit | N/A | 5+ | N/A |
| Dual Injustice | 2001 | Witness/CMDPDH | Witness | Witness | Torture/Feminicide | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| A Duty to Protect | 2005 | Witness/AJEDI-KA/PES | Witness | Witness-HUB | Child Soldiers in DRC | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Peace One Day | 2004 | Jeremy Gilley | Peace One Day | Peace One Day | International Day of Peace | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| InsightShare | 2000 | Participatory Facilitated | InsightShare | N/A | Participatory Video for Social Change | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| HCLU Films | 2009 | HCLU Film Staff | HCLU/Witness | Vimeo/HUB/online | Drug Policy/Civil Liberties | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| AWFT Video Productions | 2000 | AWFT | AWFT | N/A | Participatory Video for Community Awareness | NonProfit | N/A | N/A | N/A |

3.2 Communications Intervention & Impact Model

The following figure represents the strategic application of films within communications technologies and processes to promote social change. The model is a hybrid derived from the field of development communications and political communications research. These models all have distinct intellectual roots and differing emphases in terms of project design and goals. The two models from the development framework are based on a diffusion model – named for Everett M. Rogers’ (1962) diffusion of innovations theory, which focuses on knowledge transfer leading to behavioral change; and the participatory model which is based on ideas from Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that focuses on community involvement and dialogue as a catalyst for individual and community empowerment.¹³ While the diffusion model centers on information dissemination via mass media, where the information transfer is vertical, the participatory model centers on grassroots participation via group interaction where the exchange and dialogue is horizontal. The two are not polar opposites and used together incorporate a range of interventions and utilizations: from established advertising techniques, social marketing campaigns to participatory development platforms and evaluation processes of community empowerment. In order to ground these models with recent and relevant theory, I incorporated Whiteman’s coalition model & issue-network framework, focusing on a set of strategic recommendations for putting a film or video “to work” within a social movement, awareness campaign, or grassroots mobilization.

The case selection and model provided the data for the development of the typology. It should be mentioned, however that it is difficult to discover a pattern of successful techniques – most campaigns and projects use combinations of strategies which can vary

¹³ Nancy Morris (2003) The diffusion and participatory models: a comparative analysis. In *Media and Glocal Change* (2005), Hemer, O. & Tufte, T. (eds.) Buenos Aires: CLASCO, pp123-144.

from case to case, from local to national to global, depending on resources, politics and objectives.

3.2.1 Figure 2: Impact Framework

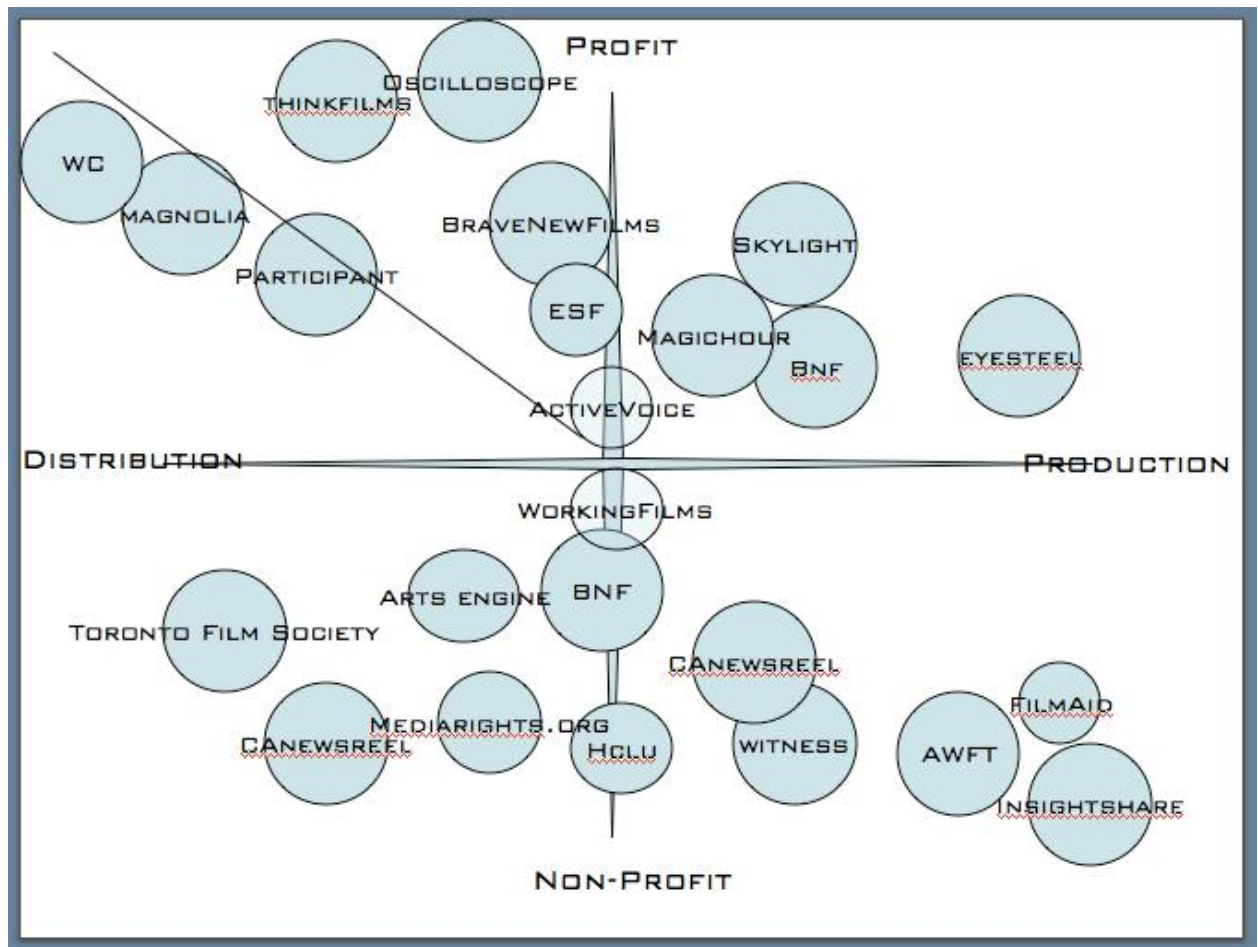
| FILMS | FRAMEWORK | | | OBJECTIVES | | | | CAMPAIGN | | | | MEASUREMENT/DISTR. | | | | OUTCOME | | | |
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Chapter 4. Typologies

Having identified the actors involved it is clear that they represent a wide range of action and utilization of the medium. When considering how to define the relationships between traditional film and video and alternative or participatory projects, I first looked at business models of all entities involved in this analysis; whether the entity was for profit or not, and whether the focus of impact was on distribution or production. The more traditional production companies are lined up along the distribution side and represent both independent and non-independent companies. The upper right quadrant is where Participant Media is located, as well as Brave New Films where focus is on the distribution and profit – however it must be noted that these two companies represent subtypes within the same quadrant. What discerns them is 1). Independent media company: not having corporate support or influence, i.e. produced mostly outside of a major film studio, and 2). The distribution is used as part of a campaign directly attached to the film. This is clear when you look at the figure, as this distribution tactic along with media independence separates the two. The lower quadrants represent use of the medium by non-profit organizations, which are engaged in both aspects, distribution and production, where the Y axis separates the use into: campaign and development quadrants. The last quadrant is the most undeveloped in contemporary analysis and represents an area for further research and development within both academia and the business world. Within this typology we can see how the different elements of the medium ecology play in the creation and distribution and ultimately the use of either the process or the product. The X and Y axis signify different binary characteristics of contemporary political video and film projects, including: production:consumption, theatrical:journalistic, information:entertainment, representation:participation and process:product. The first

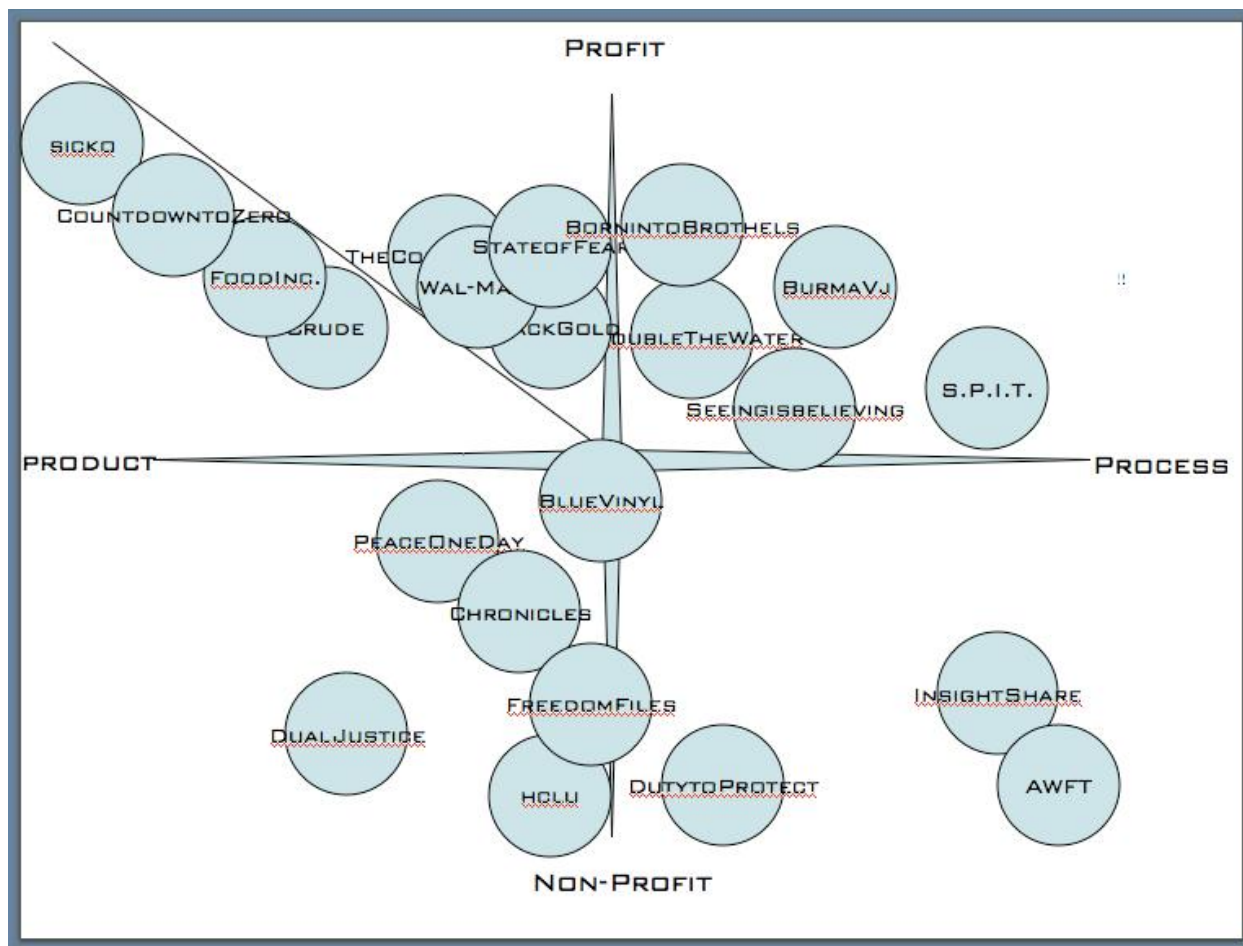
typology represents a business and organization model according to the production/distribution distinction- whether the impact modality functions higher at the distribution stage or the production stage - and profit/nonprofit arrangement, which serves to map the actors, agents and intermediaries involved in the creation, production and distribution of the films and videos, while the second typology maps the individual film and video project selection. These typologies map the uses of film and video designed to effectuate social change and are intended to provide a framework for further analysis, to clarify the existing dialogue and ideas in the field, and to identify specific focus areas and sub categories.

4.1 Figure 3: Typology I - Business & Organization Models¹⁴



¹⁴ *linear division of upper left quadrant separates independent media companies from corporate.

4.2 Figure 4: Typology II - Case Selection (Films & Video Projects)



4.3 Process::Non-Profit

This quadrant is best represented by participatory video projects. Activists and academics usually mention how participatory video ‘gives voice to the voiceless’ and ‘empowers marginalized communities,’ highlighting the complex ways PV can trigger individual and collective change. Participation is the key element and its place within the typology indicates that the outcomes are based on the process of production and how that has an impact on individuals and communities at different levels. These productions are not designed for theatres or packaging, rather they function as modalities of horizontal communication at a local level, whether it be in the form of screenings or person to person

distribution. The utilization of the medium in this sense is for self-definition and for sharing experiences (Matewa 2010). At this level, participation in video production can bring about real social change and is empirically measurable. Throughout the process, participants are able to engage critically with several issues while also collectively identifying factors that were causing problems, in order to move towards solutions, preventions and resolutions. Furthermore, the process is about empowerment, leadership capacity, community building, decision making and democratization at a local level. The individual changes brought about by the production process aggregate in the open dialogue and discussion created by the filming process. Transformation happens from start to finish and continues with the living historical document captured in the film.

InsightShare is a leader in the user of participatory video as a tool for individuals and groups to grow in self-confidence and trust, and to build skills for social change. Their PV facilitation methods are based on local knowledge, building bridges between communities and decision makers and empowering citizens; focusing on the relationships and changes happening around the medium. Their goals are to develop local participation and to achieve full local ownership based on the strengths behind the technological development process (InsightShare.org). An exemplary project took place in Burkina Faso within a coalition of NGO's, development agencies and research institutions with the goal to reduce maternal mortality. Choosing six health workers and midwives to take part in the PV project and incorporating health services and families, they forwarded their message through a thirty minute documentary that raised awareness and provided real, on the ground grassroots solutions for maternal mortality in Burkina.

The impact was measured by local organization around the campaign as well as the dynamic nature of the film that was designed for local communities and decision makers. The

documentary was shown throughout Burkina and was broadcast on local television. At the policy level, with the help of White Ribbon alliance¹⁵ the film and campaign was directly responsible for convincing political leaders to increase the budget for maternal health.¹⁶

Similar organizations, like the African Women's Filmmakers Trust, have discovered that video is a reflexive medium that enables participants to be both object and subject and gives confidence with the knowledge that their story will be heard beyond their local boundaries. Video utilization in the participatory function has a modality of impact that recognizes and empowers marginalized communities and individuals, enabling them to take action toward social change (Matewa, 2003).

4.4 Product: :Non-Profit

This quadrant is best represented by video advocacy campaigns, however there are some interesting developments in this field vis a vis partnerships with new media companies and developments within the third sector development methodologies. This perhaps is one of the most effective holistic utilizations of the medium and in many ways represents many aspects of the coalition model outlined above. Both the Sierra Club and the ACLU employed documentaries as part of a 2005 outreach campaign. Both organizations partnered with Robert Greenwald and Brave New Films to make the *Sierra Club Chronicles* and *ACLU Freedom Files*. They received additional support through grants from the Ford Foundation and their own organizations. With the goal of reaching out beyond the selectivity barrier, they employed dynamic distribution strategies- techniques including, satellite, digital cable, web downloads, and house parties to mobilize a broader demographic. The campaigns expanded opportunities for film activism by emphasizing the importance of connections with grassroots

¹⁵ WRA raises international awareness about the nearly 60,000 women who die each year pregnancy-related complications, worldwide. (whiteribbonalliance.org)

¹⁶ Case Study: Maternal Mortality in Burkina Faso. InsightShare.org.

chapters. To quote Dahlgren, “the public sphere does not begin and end when media content reaches an audience, this is but one step in larger communication and cultural chains that include how the media output is received, discussed, made sense of, re-interpreted and circulated among and utilized by citizens.” The modality of impact for these two organizations was in organizational strategy, outreach campaign and the use of Web2.0 technology, which all had measurable impact. Both documentaries were broadcast on Link TV via satellite and digital cable to 28 million viewers; 15,000 web downloads (*Chronicles*), 1.2 million page views and 30,000 visitors per month during the broadcast on ACLU.tv (*Freedom Files*); a combined 50,000 DVD’s sold and distributed for free to individuals and organizations, as well as distribution to retailers and hundreds of local screenings and events. In terms of policy change, one citizen, a sixth generation rancher who had lost cattle stock to toxic poisoning from contaminated water put the film to work as a lobbying tool by bringing copies to Washington D.C. and giving one to every senator and representative from a Western state. Previous petitions to the Bureau of Land Management and energy companies had failed and while it cannot be known if legislators viewed the program, in 2006 the US passed the Valle Vidal Protection Act of 2005 (Hirsch 2007).

This quadrant cannot be mentioned without referencing Witness.org; who by their very motto *See it. Film it. Change it.* exemplifies the role of video in the world today. Witness uses video to open the eyes of the world to human rights violations and empowers people to transform personal stories of abuse into powerful tools for justice, promoting public engagement and policy change (www.witness.org). *A Duty to Protect* (2005) is an advocacy video focusing on the widespread recruitment and use of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and calls for increased support, strengthening of international institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) by more local involvement in the issue.

Partnering with international and local aid organizations *Duty to Protect* targeted the ICC, US decision makers and the international community. Their distribution strategy incorporated civil society organizations, UN representatives and Congressional staffers, among others. The campaign was featured on PBS, CNN, WYNC, internationally on a popular German television series, and on Voice of America Radio and television programs in Africa. The video was screened at a public event in The Hague during the Assembly of State Parties to the Rome Statute and in private meetings with policy and political elites. The results of the video advocacy campaign were significant. Nearly a year later, Thomas Lubanga Dyilo was arrested by the ICC for involvement in the enlisting and conscripting of child soldiers and was convicted the following year, and in 2008, in line with the goals of the campaign, the ICC established a local office in Eastern DRC.¹⁷ Advocacy videos have been successful at focusing on a specific issue, incorporating NGOs and other interest groups as well as targeting policy makers and political elites in their quest for justice.

4.5 Product::Profit

This quadrant is unique in that it can be separated by independent and mainstream social issue documentary and video. However, the important aspect is how the organizational strategies of participatory and advocacy video have percolated up into not only independent productions but the mainstream as well. Within the independent productions there has been a move towards campaign integration and for a majority of independent, social issue documentaries it is becoming standard practices. *State of Fear* (2002) focuses on restorative justice in Peru through the work of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, around the issue of human rights violations by a dictatorial government in the name of “war on terrorism”. Through a multiplatform outreach campaign and creative adaptations of digital

¹⁷ Witness.org Case Study: Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo
(http://www.witness.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=532&Itemid=60)

technologies the reach of the film has been extended into remote villages and the US by international NGOS. These tactics combined with a high quality film helped spark an international justice media initiative around the issue. By working closely with the International Center for Transitional Justice, engaging local communities, entering the human rights film festival circuit, reaching living rooms through channels such as National Geographic International Channel, History Channel en Espanol, and the Sundance Channel, social networking outreach campaigns, and NGO distribution of hundreds DVDs and teaching guides, this film demonstrates the way a film can be embedded in a social movement, which can mobilize a public and forward human rights initiatives. A film like *State of Fear* “demonstrates how the creative deployment of digital technologies can produce a multiplatform, multilingual outreach campaign that engages international and local audiences, provides tools for human rights advocacy, and creates spaces and language for public discourse in diverse cultures. Its example has inspired a far-reaching international justice media initiative (Abrash, 2009).” Films like *State of Fear* exhibit a close relationship with social movements, which is what distinguishes them from their counterparts within the same quadrant.

On the other side of the line within this quadrant there are the mainstream “blockbuster” documentary films like *Sicko* (2007), which have recently been garnering more box office revenue, securing a place within a market that can only expand through the advances in the impact modalities in other areas. The section of this quadrant represents the documentaries that find a small niche in the ubiquitous world of corporate advertising, competing with blockbuster nonfiction films and employing traditional tactics under the assumption that if advertisements sell products then visual imagery linked to a social justice narrative and properly branded can sell social action (Barrett & Leddy 2008). The focus is

still on the distribution model, in other words more viewers' equals more sales. But there is empirical support to show that these productions are beginning to incorporate grassroots and social movement tactics into the production and distribution of their films. Mobilization around an issue is not longer about how long the line is at the box office. Conventionally, films that fit into this categorical description have been more isolated from social movements. What is interesting in this quadrant is the innovation in the campaign strategies that are linked to the production, and the horizontal development of new trajectories and action repertoires. *Food Inc.* (2009) is one example of this.

Food Inc. is connected to at least ten different social issues including the advocacy support of a pending national food safety legislation, engaged in the film and promoted on the films' website. The website is awash with calls to action, "get involved" opportunities, petitions, alliances, multimedia press kits, reading lists and links to a coalition of social movements, activists and policy makers. The film's box office revenue was more than \$4.5 million but beyond the distribution model we are seeing how mainstream, blockbuster documentaries are taking on the strategic developments that began in the grassroots alternative media movement, within the advocacy domain and now being utilized as an additional and successful modality of impact. Premiering in April on the PBS program *POV*, the national broadcast premier was flanked by the Food, Inc. website streaming the full length film and conducting a National Potluck Campaign which invites people to host a meal, watch the film and talk about the issue. *Food, Inc.* had an average audience of 1.87 million viewers; more than 165,000 people watched the film on the PBS website and at local community events. "Food, Inc." and "POV" were in the top ten search terms on the PBS website in the two weeks following the broadcast; there were more than 400,000 visitors to the Food, Inc. website during the month of April, with the "Host a Potluck" ranking as the

third most popular destination on the site. In terms of social media the Potluck Campaign hashtag - #foodincparty – was tweeted over 3,200 times in April and a tune-in notice reached over 100,000 people according to TweetReach, including celebrities. The film also aggregated over 500 comments from viewers on the POV website and over 200 on the fan page. In addition to the Potluck, thirty three community screenings were organized in twenty states attended by more than 6,000 people, and nearly 7,000 people have viewed POV's *Food, Inc.s lesson plans* which focus on nutritional education, agricultural subsidies and food choice, health and the economy and the debate surrounding GMO modified seeds (AM Doc News 5/19/2010).

All these developments can be linked back to innovations at the production level. Since 2008 Participant Media has expanded into more non-traditional entertainment media and has a branch specifically devoted to social action documentaries. From the company website: *The company seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference.* To facilitate this, Participant creates specific social action campaigns for each film and documentary designed to give a voice to issues that resonate in and around the films. Participant teams with social sector organizations, non-profits and corporations who are committed to creating an open forum for discussion, education and who can, with Participant, offer specific ways for audience members to get involved. These include action kits, screening programs, educational curriculums and classes, house parties, seminars, panels and other activities and are ongoing "legacy" programs that are updated and revised to continue beyond the film's domestic and international theatrical, DVD and television release and distribution windows. To date, Participant has developed active, working relationships with 156 non-profits who collectively have the potential of reaching over 75 million people.

4.7 Process::Product

The last quadrant represents one of the most unexplored in terms of impact assessment. It constitutes a hybrid model of documentary film and video that has significant potential in the networked age. In what can be considered the vanguard of filmmaking today, filmmakers are incorporating user generated content; on the ground video reporting from closed societies and reports from the underworld the typical filmmaker can struggle to capture and the typical political audience does not have access to witness.

Production companies like EyeSteelFilm who have completed multiple projects, which empower the homeless by providing them access to digital cameras and web-based activity.¹⁸ *Burma VJ* (2009), which was composed of edited raw footage from behind the curtain of the Burmese military junta, smuggled to Thailand and mailed to Norway for broadcast on the Democratic Voice of Burma satellite TV station, represents the potential of film video in this quadrant to factor into to the transition from closed societies or absolutist regimes into an open and liberal-democratic society. In terms of impact, one can gauge the success by the Oscar nomination, the coalition with Film Aid international and partnerships with various British civil society organizations committed to resolving the situation in Burma. The film was screened in London at 10 Downing Street on the eve of the 64th birthday of Burma's detained pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Directory Anders Ostergaard in an interview with IndieLondon further remarked on the political impact of the film, "...President Obama has actually got behind this too, and gave it as a personal present to Hilary Clinton. He's almost adopted it because I think the film manages to explain what human rights and freedom of expression is all about (Carnevale-Ostergaard Interview,

¹⁸ See *S.P.I.T. : Squeegee Punks In Traffic* (2001)

IndieLondon.co.uk).” Measuring impact is difficult however, the coalition with activists and organizations is evident and the film is indeed being “put to work” in civil society. Yet, in terms of reaching beyond audience awareness or consciousness raising, it is simply not possible to evaluate due to the nature of the closed society that is controlled by an authoritarian military junta. Policy change cannot occur at this point without armed intervention – the impact is the window, the looking glass through which calls for aid and action can escape. In many ways this type of social issue documentary merges the impact modalities of the participatory, advocacy, new media and mainstream documentary films of today.

With the advances of citizen journalism and the development of what Downing calls *autonomous media*, the potential for film and video to have greater democratizing and support mobilizing power is clearly on the horizon. Within these new counter-publics, subaltern voices are percolating up into the mainstream and popular culture, civil society expansion is entering new tropes of deliberation via media and social issue documentaries are broadening their modalities for political impact.

4.8 Evaluation

Social issue documentary and video contribute to everyday political practices. In the field of media research it intersects with the larger disciplinary question of whether this research should be seen primarily as the analysis of social movements or the analysis of a process of mediation. In the scope provided here, as well as in the expanding space of media research it would appear that definitions, concepts and empirical priorities are developing from both sides (Couldry 2010: 26). In evaluating the typological analysis there are implicit relationships with the organizational structures of social movements; in this case the alternative media movement and the use of film and video for political engagement, and as a

component to social change. These structures include friendship networks, informal networks among activists, movement communities and formal organizations which, “contribute to the movement’s cause without begin directly engaged in the process of mobilization for collective action (Kriesi 1996: 152).” The typologies can also signify the organizational development of the utilization of the medium as a political tool. Each quadrant possesses slightly different goal orientations and action repertoires. The organizational structures around social issue film and video are becoming more coherent as audience begins to merge with constituency, and productions at the highest level are invoking political and grassroots campaigning elements into their advertising schemes. In either arena, the action campaigns mobilize however, and not just to the theatres but out into the streets as well.

Following Zald and Ash (1966), Kriesi suggests that there are at least four possible transformations of a social movement organization. What is interesting here is that these characteristics are strikingly similar to the impact modalities found in the typology. Just as social movement organization can take on different characteristics over time and will develop in that manner, so too can the use of the film and video medium within this assessment in different variations. In a typology of transformations of goal orientations and action repertoires, Kriesi (155-157) identifies four variants: *institutionalization*, *commercialization*, *involution* and *radicalization*.

This can loosely be applied to each of the four quadrants, yet they are not absolute as the lines between these characteristics are indeed fluid. *Institutionalization* refers to when a social movement becomes more like a party or interest group where the internal structure is developed, has very clear and specific goals, its action repertoire is conventionalized and it becomes integrated into established systems of interest intermediation. In terms of impact modalities, in this sense, *Institutionalization* is definitively linked to the lower quadrants

where advocacy campaigns, development initiatives, participation, justice and equity are characteristic of the organizations utilizing film and video. The next transformation is that of *commercialization* and it is not difficult to guess which quadrant this corresponds with. In this case it is less about transformation of modality and more about the emphasis on profit, or more to the point the utilization of the medium as a business enterprise. While this is nothing new in the way of blockbuster films, the changing goal orientations and action repertoires of these major production companies and distributors indicate a move away from traditional models. However, only time will tell whether this will be a boon or a bane as the absorption of alternative media via popular culture into the mainstream continues. More social issue and *call to action* films are getting made, but at what cost the public sphere and civil society action? That is a question that cannot be answered here.

The third transformation is *Involution* which is defined as a path that leads to an exclusive emphasis “on social incentives,” and as applied to this model of social uses of film and video it would appear that this applies throughout the typology as social activities and coalitions of activists and organizations forming around a film or video become more common. Finally, *Radicalization*, is the path to reinvigorated mobilization and corresponds to radical developments in the utilization of user-generated-content, film from closed societies, citizen reporting, all fusing with contemporary practices in film production and distribution. Of course the correlations between these organizational structures and transformations are not exact, the relationship is not intended to be exclusive – but the mutual determination discernable among these relationships reveals and conceptualizes the richness and historical variability of social issue documentary and video as embedded in a larger political context at the core of contemporary social movements and civil society action.

Not only do film and video represent a viable tool for democracy, but also the medium can navigate and facilitate the issues surrounding the digital divide. Video and media for development, like participatory video and community film screenings, provide an indispensable service to the communities and peoples that are either illiterate or have little to no access to technology or education. Within this process film has the capacity to link them with the outside and connected world by providing them with something tangible; a product that can be inserted into the local deliberation process, by which organization, engagement and realistic outcomes can be generated. If you look at the microcosmic significance of a relatively low-fi technology in an autochthonic environment, one sees that it mirrors the significance of a modern democracy's access to multiple platforms, media tropes and horizontal networking that have deepened not only the concept of democratic deliberation but the possibility for anarchic modes of organization¹⁹ but one must ask whether these new ICTs and social media have already been globalized, institutionalized and thus part of a new hegemonic dominance, whereby security and privacy are no longer issues to be dealt with, but become the trade-off for access to the ever-changing tools of political communication and deliberation.

¹⁹ By *anarchic*, it is meant without institutionalized guidance or hegemonic steering.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

It is clear by previous research in this field (Whiteman 2001-2007; ERIN Research Inc., 2005; Barret & Leddy: Fledgling Fund 2008) and by this project, that for films to have significant impact in terms of action, they must be embedded in a larger social construct, as part of a movement or campaign -in this context the budget of a film or video is not as significant as these elements all functioning in a holistic manner – half of the impact is from the film itself, the product, the other half is everything else, the process. The mobilizing capacity of film and video, and the empowering, community building and individual transformation capabilities of participatory and advocacy work can help lead the way in policy changes and further education around the issue through coalitions and networks. Through screenings, community and grassroots organizations, town hall meetings, print and broadcast media and through the education system, films can enter the public discourse and deliver impact through multiple levels of social action. As new opportunities for distribution emerge, such as internet distribution and online streaming video and films' impact expands beyond the typical reach of marketing strategies and promotional outreach. With new developments and further research contributions such as this, there is room for the possibility of assessing long-term impact, incorporating more quantitative methods and developing a new set of evaluation criteria that incorporates the follow-up work needed to gauge not only success at the box office, but also in the psychological, sociological and political experiences of contemporary social issues.

This project demonstrates what many common observers know from experience: that documentaries and alternative media change attitudes and have impact, however minimal that impact may appear. This contribution to the ongoing research of political impact of social

issue documentaries and video projects in political communication studies provides generalizing concepts, alternative frameworks, sub categories and of course a broad spectrum of impact modalities. Within each typological assessment there is potential explanatory power of how a film or video intervenes in the process of social change. Autonomous media, citizen and community media are mainstreaming via the legacy of the alternative media movement, which suggests a reconfiguration of the public sphere and implications for global civil society's use of the medium. Film and video operate on two levels of participation: on one the film communicates the movement's message, or the message that forwards the issue. As a tool it *expands*, while at the other level, the utilization of the medium *engages* directly. Expansion and engagement increases exposure, which is essential to either film or social cause.

The level of participation indeed matters as we can see with the cases of local, indigenous, and community based participatory video percolating into mainstream, highly funded productions. These tactics, combined with subversive citizen video, have the potential to penetrate closed societies, which if anything at all, gets the message out to the world. What we see with the modal impact of *Burma VJ*, is what is the first order, which in this case, is to peer behind the curtain, expose, engage and ultimately act. Social issue documentary has the potential to penetrate closed societies. With the advent of the globalization of social media and low cost video technology, this new media landscape can alter the way citizens engage the world.

Inherent in the documentary genre is the commitment to social justice and advocacy. This contributes to a new way of "seeing" documentary- a new mode of interaction with a political communication medium. What this means for global civil society is how citizens, filmmakers, productions companies and third sector actors can incorporate dynamic political

and social strategies around a classic medium through new technological innovations. For the academic this provides new methods to interpret and measure the degree of impact, to develop frameworks, models and methodologies that have a reach far beyond minimal effects. The scope presented here is a descriptive analysis, yet it suggests at the future of social issue documentary and its viability as an agent of civil society and political communication. As these tactics become more mainstream, it will become clear indeed, that it is not enough to simply watch. The uses of this medium in political contexts are threads that weave a dynamic public sphere, linking alternative media, participatory democracy and social change.

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