

Your film can **CHANGE THE WORLD**

There is a long history of highly creative social issue documentary filmmaking but it is exploding at the moment, as production and distribution become more accessible to more people than ever before, and as social issue films are seen, not merely as fodder for school classrooms, but as potential box office hits with the power to make celebrities out of their directors (if you are Michael Moore or Morgan Spurlock at least).

By Ingrid Kopp



A LONGSIDE THIS FILMMAKING ACTIVITY IS AN INCREASING awareness of the power that these documentaries can have as tools for fundraising and creating change in the world—with the added benefit that these outreach campaigns also allow the films to reach new audiences in new ways.

Michael Raisler from Cinereach, a grant-giving organisation based in New York, refers to “the social *and* economic capital of building communities around your film.” Outreach is a quantifiable activity that can be linked to arts and culture funding and filmmakers are devising increasingly sophisticated methods to tap into this potential, as both a source of funding and to give their films life beyond a single distribution window, creating sustained impact across communities and across time.

This strategy is more common in the United States, where there is a longer tradition of foundation support and outreach campaigns. However, as documentary filmmakers in the UK discover that they can no longer rely on old models of funding and distribution, the benefits of this approach are becoming clear here too.

Jess Search, chief executive of the Channel 4 British Documentary Film Foundation (www.britdoc.org), sees enormous potential in this new landscape. “Films are more powerful when they become movements, when they amplify the work of campaigners and charities and when they engage citizens to become active participants rather than passive audiences. The bottom line is that filmmakers need to have much closer, more strategic relationships with the NGOs who share their goals.” Search says that documentaries everywhere need new models for funding and distribution but “what is unique



Parvez Sharma, director of A JIHAD FOR LOVE

about the UK is a long history of excellent public service television which has led us to believe that funding and distributing documentaries is the sole responsibility of television. At the foundation, we believe it is now absolutely necessary for new partners to get involved in documentaries, alongside the traditional public service broadcasters. Things are beginning to change and it’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

One filmmaker who has become very aware of the power of forming coalitions around a film is Sandi DuBowski, director of TREMBLING BEFORE G-D (www.filmsbthatchangebetheworld.com) and producer of Parvez Sharma’s recent film A JIHAD FOR LOVE (www.ajibadforlove.com). TREMBLING BEFORE G-D, a film about gay Hasidic and Orthodox Jews, was DuBowski’s first film and he was surprised by the powerful movement it created: “We had no idea what it would mean to take a film into the world. Every step became a way to play with the platform and reinvent it. We did outreach as an extreme sport with over 800 live events.”

DuBowski worked with Working Films (www.workingfilms.org), who are experts in the field of building communities and campaigns around a film, to create a Mormon-Jewish gay dialogue at the Sundance Film Festival when his film screened there. This model was then built upon during their theatrical run where screenings were turned into meetings and debates. DuBowski talks about the huge benefits that this approach reaped, as funders who gave money to TREMBLING were then also willing to support A JIHAD FOR LOVE, a film about gay Muslims around the world. “The funders see their grants have massive impact and then they’re with you for the long haul,” DuBowski notes, “You create a continuity of supporters.”



A JIHAD FOR LOVE



DuBowski is very honest about the hard work and time commitment that this approach involves but says, “I relate to the world through these social networks anyway—it’s my DNA. But you can always link up with organisations who do this like Active Voice and Working Films. There are also outreach directors out there who do this for a living.” For DuBowski it is all about investing in the people who will take your campaign forward, forming coalitions so that the entire burden does not fall on the filmmaker. Otherwise there can be a tension between the demands of filmmaking and feeling like you have unwittingly become the executive director of an NGO. “You need to create leadership development, especially for films like this where it is the first time these issues are being spoken about, and you need to be smart about time and resources and organisational development so you don’t get burnt out.”

Jess Search points to a couple of British success stories funded by the Foundation who have benefited from outreach campaigns, “BLACK GOLD was our first film at Sundance and the first to get a theatrical release. It was very influential with audiences, coffee companies such as Starbucks and policy makers. WE ARE TOGETHER (www.wearetogether.org) was our second film to get a theatrical release—we partnered with [RED] on the UK release and with Keep a Child Alive, a US-based charity involved in the making of the film, on the US release. END OF THE LINE, our film about the collapse in global fish stocks, which is editing now, will be our most ambitious change-making project so far. It’s an international film with many partners including WWF and aims to change global fish policy.”

Teddy Leifer, producer of WE ARE TOGETHER, talks about how mutually beneficial these kinds of relationships can be: “There are so many shared interests. Non-profit partners have so much expertise in these areas and ultimately everyone wins.” Leifer’s advice, like DuBowski’s, is to share the load. “You need to realise that you

don’t have all the skills you need. The life of a film carries on and you need to make a decision about when to let go and what to let go of. Surround yourself with able people who can benefit the film and who will benefit from it in turn.”

Esther Robinson, a filmmaker who has also worked as a funder at the Creative Capital Foundation in the US, emphasises the importance of preparing yourself for the gruelling distribution and outreach process. “Your film is like a giant marathon and it doesn’t end when your film is finished and you are ready to pass out and are totally broke. You’re only about a third of the way through the process at this point. But you can build a structure of validation around your film through outreach.” Robinson adds that this process should start early. “Your outreach should start when you first pick up your camera. You should create the sort of partnerships where they are as invested in your film’s success as you are.”

Filmmakers can feel pigeonholed, obliged to promote the message above the art, and there has always been debate in the documentary community about the privileging of social issue documentaries over other non-fiction films when it comes to funding and industry recognition. Katy Chevigny, executive director of the US non-profit Arts Engine and director of ELECTION DAY, finds this frustrating sometimes. “I’m still trying to make a film first and foremost. It’s hard to make your film unless you make the sort of message film that foundations are looking for. We’re not considered just artists. It becomes about supporting the cause rather than about supporting the artist’s work in general.”

Ultimately, however, it seems that everyone agrees that the possibilities outweigh the problems. In the UK the learning curve is particularly steep but the benefits are clear. As Jess Search puts it, “Documentary filmmakers and the third sector have much to learn about each other’s needs, preoccupations and working practices. There will be misunderstandings and frustrations but as time goes on I think we’ll build really powerful collaboration models. The rewards of a successful partnership are overwhelming and will make the journey one worth taking for both sides.” Esther Robinson acknowledges how hard the process can be but her parting advice is hopeful: “Make your life good, don’t get into too much debt and do something meaningful.” ■



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