

# **Making a difference: diverse uses of committed documentary**

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## Introduction

Just over three years ago I watched as the issue of unauthorised refugee arrivals in Australia came to the forefront of public consciousness through a tragic series of events. My disbelief turned to horror as events moved from the Tampa standoff, to the children who weren't thrown overboard, the sinking of the SIEV X and the heartbreak that is resulting from immigration detention and the so-called "Pacific Solution".

The short experimental documentary, "Out of Fear", which was completed in 2003, came out of the feelings of frustration and disillusion I experienced when witnessing these events. It was one of my responses to the treatment being dealt out to people who were coming to Australia in search of a safe place. This paper addresses some of the issues that arose for me as I made and distributed a documentary that was in some way attempting to "make a difference".

### What does it mean for a documentary to make a difference?

In her paper entitled "Political Mimesis", Jane M. Gaines speaks of an informal poll she conducted in response to a list of "the 10 documentaries that changed the world". Gaines wrote, "As I anticipated, they {the poll respondents} argued that it was only in connection with moments or movements that films could be expected to make a contribution to social change, and that in and of themselves, they had no power to affect political situations" (Gaines, 1999 p 85). We may clearly see the logic of this, particularly in terms of theoretical understandings of audiences and their uses of media. Yet, "committed documentaries", (Waugh, 1984) continue to be made and circulated in answer to situations of inequality and injustice.

Perhaps our error then, is to consider these films in isolation from the "moments or movements" that have given rise to them. If the documentaries alone have not changed the world, they are nonetheless part of a body of activist work that has brought some considerable change. Therefore, rather than the expansive, and more difficult to quantify notion of changing the *world*, I am going to address a more general idea of the ways that committed documentary can make a difference. This kind of difference is much more subtle than the fantasy of "the audience that is collectively *moved* to get up out of their theatre seats

and take some kind of group action on behalf of a political cause” (Gaines, 1999 p 89) in reaction to viewing a documentary program.

### **Grassroots distribution and the documentary afterlife**

One group that does see documentary working in connection with social movements is the North Carolina based *Working Films*, co-founded by Judith Helfand and Robert West. Described first and foremost as an educational organisation, the project of *Working Films* is to link up documentary makers with activist organisations that can use their films as part of coordinated campaigns. However, based on their experience, for outreach programs to be truly effective they need to be part of the planning of the film from very early on. It’s a collaborative style of working that is very much in the mode advocated by Helfand’s mentor, filmmaker, George Stoney<sup>1</sup>.

The logic is that by consulting those already active in the area from the beginning stages of the project, filmmakers can be in tune with the important issues, thereby enriching the research, development and production of their documentaries. At the same time, vital coalitions are being built that can be put into action when it comes to the eventual outreach program. It also means that filmmakers are not working in isolation from the movement surrounding an issue. This has the potential to deepen their understanding and to offer different perspectives on their topic.

As West explains, “there are extraordinary resources available out there to filmmakers that are not always represented by a dollar figure. Outreach for a film is not saying to non-profit organizations and activists, ‘create a whole new grassroots campaign using this film,’ it’s saying how do we use this piece of media in the grassroots campaign you’ve already developed.” (Betancourt and Gopalarathinam, 2001)

For some filmmakers this may raise concerns about getting to make the film they want to. However for Helfand, such collaborations needn’t result in the loss of authorial voice. She closely collaborated with activists during the production of her documentary, “A Healthy Baby Girl”. For her, the process of talking to groups active in highlighting the impact of

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<sup>1</sup> Helfand, Stoney and Susanne Rostock worked together to make the documentary film, “The Uprising of ‘34” – a film that is something of a landmark when it comes to grassroots distribution and that *has* managed to make it on to those lists of “films that changed the world”.

chemicals upon unborn children helped her to realise that she could be "...true to myself as a filmmaker and still make a difference." (Betancourt and Gopalarathinam, 2001)

The *Working Films* model for outreach is one that sees filmmakers as organisers and activists within movements for social change. It is a chance to put into action the considerable work involved in making a film with a concerted long-term strategy. West explains that part of his motivation for being involved in setting the organisation up was to find a better afterlife for good documentary films. In organising screenings and festivals in his local area, he found it was often the case where, "we got all this collective energy together (community members, organisers and filmmakers) but then, after the screening it would all dissipate. Not only was the audience fleeting, but so was the life of a documentary film. We would get the titles within 6 months of the release date; regardless if the work was relevant and pertinent after a year, there was a sense that material was already dated. There's an artificial structure that keeps documentary films on short circuit, undercutting their real impact." (Charnov, 2001 ) For Helfand, the experience of making "Uprising of '34" and "A Healthy Baby Girl" demonstrated that "the films became most effective long after the first year of their release". (Charnov, 2001)

However, the *Working Films* emphasis on grassroots distribution does not negate the perceived benefits of securing television screenings of their films. Even with the coalition-building model of screenings that they employed with "Uprising of '34", a national television broadcast of the film was still seen as essential. Helfand says this was important "not only for introducing a suppressed history into public memory, but in giving the film the legitimacy to 'do its continuing work in a slow, calm, long-term way'". (Abrash and Whiteman, 1999 p 93)

### **Influencing *what* is remembered**

This aspect of influencing what is kept in the public record and therefore becomes history, is important to consider when looking at how documentary can make a difference. For filmmaker Ethem Özgüven, it has been a most significant factor in the development of the working practice he employs. Even as someone well experienced in the hard slog of funding, producing and distributing "committed documentaries", he is unswerving when describing all documentaries as propaganda films. However rather than seeing this as a fact

from which to resile, he now uses it as a justification to employ the techniques of other propaganda forms that are rewriting history, notably 30 second television commercials. After spending many years and much of his and his partner's personal resources on producing the full-length documentary, "People of the light's long walk", frustration at the film's limited impact led him to more closely examine the techniques of advertising.

"In the beginning I have said documentary is propaganda film. So according to my own approach, commercial film and documentary propaganda films become two different versions of the same thing." (Özgüven, 2002)

Özgüven speaks of a national bank's advertising campaign. This campaign aired in Turkey and was targeted at young people. The commercial depicted an idealised past where young girls jumped skipping ropes, ate lollipops, played with hula hoops, slid down banisters and went to a bank. For Özgüven, the function of this campaign was to transform history. "In the eighties (and in the fifties, sixties and seventies too) people died in this country. There was torture, there was the black market, there was the coup, and there was war. They sent people on exile out of their country and their universities. There were not only the girls jumping ropes, and flipping back and forth then. When you take a look at important commercials recently, especially those shot with a big production budget, you will see much more clearly that their purpose and function is actually to transform history. When you transform history you transform today and more importantly, tomorrow too." (Özgüven, 2002)

By conflating these two forms of propaganda films, Özgüven sees no obstacle to advocating for documentary to "take back what has been stolen, undeterred, from all of art history and science by commercials and use these devices when required". (Özgüven, 2002) Indeed it is these very devices that he has employed in producing "social spots" addressing issues ranging from mental health, domestic violence, homelessness and drug addiction through to earthquake safety, safe drinking water and sea pollution. His work makes use of a poetic aesthetic and employs the propagandist techniques of advertising in order to convey a message for social change.

These "social spots" are produced with funding from government agencies and are broadcast on television. Programmed as commercials, they must also fit within time

constraints of 30 seconds and 1 minute. However Özgüven is definite that this is a strategic choice. "Choosing this format does not stem from a lack of time or the fact that advertising time on television is expensive. It is a very conscious choice that increases the propaganda's effectiveness." (Özgüven, 2002) This is particularly the case in light of what he sees as "the perception limits of today's human being, their way of using time, capacity to understand, patience and similar features". (Özgüven, 2002)

"I said that commercial and documentary actually is the same thing today. If there is any truth in this; we, lecturers on documentary should provide ourselves and our students with a good enough technique to shoot a commercial each, so that they can realize propaganda films that will influence the audience." (Özgüven, 2002)

### **Preaching to the converted**

One of the concerns raised by activists and filmmakers in relation to the work of committed documentary is that, in the end you are only really 'preaching to the converted'. While I don't know if this is ever strictly the case, it seems important to consider whether this is necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, there is a long history of film being used to reinvigorate solidarity among those already committed to change, notably since the work of Vertov and Eisenstein (Gaines, 1999 p 87). As movements must be sustained through a multitude of setbacks there can be no doubting the importance of supporting and reinspiring those who are already active around an issue.

Where mainstream media may depict a less than sympathetic version of "moments and movements", committed documentaries can be used as a rallying point for likeminded individuals. High profile films such as Tom Zubrycki's *Molly and Mobarak* and Bronwyn Adcock's *Inside Nauru - Pacific Despair* have provided the focus for many community meetings of refugee activists by offering a drawcard for fundraising activity and further campaign planning. If documentary is able to make a difference in connection with activist movements, then it does seem important not to underestimate this supporting role.

### **Conclusion**

In the Australian documentary production context, without the same philanthropic funding infrastructure that groups like *Working Films* are able to tap into in the United States, it may

seem difficult to see how the concerted outreach programs can be achieved without the same kind of support. This coupled with the low level of company overheads allowed in Australian documentary budgets means there's also less opportunity for cross fertilisation of 'issue' documentaries by more market oriented programming.

Nonetheless there does seem to be opportunities for current networks to be further developed and linked in with community and activist groups so that documentaries are available for distribution at lowered costs to be used as campaign resources. It's bloody hard work to run an outreach program on your own, and a locally based network that could provide a searchable, issue centred database of available films would be a good start. Such a network could also enable smaller scale productions to link up with those who have executive producer skills and so open up the possibility of operating internationally.

Alternative production paths and means of distribution are important to the diversity of voices to be heard speaking around issues. To this end it is important that we acknowledge the role played by infrastructures other than that associated with broadcast television in the production of "committed documentaries". Universities, community groups, online communities, community television and activist networks have all provided frameworks from which filmmakers have made contributions to the body of work that has grown up in support of refugee rights. While extremely low levels of funding from these sources make it nearly impossible to *make a living* with this kind of activist film production, a lively education and community sector must be seen as crucial in being able to maintain a diversity of voices and alternative networks for the production of committed documentary.

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