

ADVOCACY DOCUMENTARIES:

Recipe for Media Activists

A Workshop with Gene Bernofsky

of World Wide Film Expedition

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“Significant social change comes from the bottom up, from an aroused opinion that forces our ruling institutions to do the right thing.”

Senator Paul Wellstone 1944-2002

A Recipe for Media Activists

Ingredients

Small, inexpensive digital camcorder with external mic port for the very best mic you can afford, headphones and wide angle lens.

Creativity, personal vision, courage and truth.

Preparation

Use only outdoor shots and available light, non-derivative dramatic sequences, and straight forward editing

Add gobs of passionate advocacy, original entertainment values, non-aggressive interview techniques, respectful celebration of grassroots participants, honey and habanero peppers to taste.

Do NOT add: Professional input, salaries, artificial lighting, indoor interviews, narration, makeup, wigs, special effects, balanced reporting, lies or sell out to corporate pressure.

Suggestions

First: Don't go to film school to be ruined by greed, dogmatic structure, and the Hollywooden goals of self-importance, fame and Gucci loafers. Instead, identify a subject, cause or issue which you passionately care about and want to advocate.

Find like-minded grassroots people with the courage to speak their minds on camera. They will suggest others and your list will grow. Be certain to attain a fifty-fifty balance between female and male participants. After all, your audience will most likely be both male and female, right?

Do all the filming yourself, or have one or two, at the most, helpers. This is grassroots advocacy filmmaking. Do not overwhelm your participants with a large crew of helpers. If you do have a helper, balance male and female. Give

your helper a still camera for taking shots of the production. You will have great use for these production shots later in your advocacy campaign.

Put a bare minimum of equipment between yourself and your source. Use non-intrusive, non-intimidating equipment -- no artificial lights, reflecting umbrellas, cables, giant shoulder camcorders or massive tripods. A remote microphone with a small lavalier mic clipped on their clothes is all you need to get excellent audio.

Always shoot outside, with participants in familiar or agreed upon settings. You want this expansiveness in your visuals, rather than a contrived, airless and tightly controlled indoor setting. Use a wide angle lens. You never know what fun will come into your shot!

Film in the available light. Don't wait for perfect weather or the golden glow of early sunrise or sunset; those Hollywooden shots are trite and hackneyed. Go with the here and now. Shoot everything in the moment. This will give your film reality, immediacy and, most importantly, variety. Take shots that have never been seen!

Participants

Be gentle, gracious and respectfully patient with your participants. Don't shove a big fat microphone in their face and slap them with insipid T.V. news questions. Always remember these are not really interviews -- they are opportunities for your participants to make their views known.

Let your participants speak as long as they wish. Let them stop and start over and repeat statements and opinions. When your participants stop speaking, THEN, *perhaps*, ask a question or make a comment to get them going again. I usually film a participant for an hour or so and may wind up using only a few minutes of their talk.

Stand next to the camera when using a tripod and make eye contact with the participant. Standing next to the camera makes it look like the participant is addressing the audience. I usually do not speak, but I do nod my head to give encouragement. Suggest that the participant look directly into the camera to emphasize a particularly critical point, but use this technique sparingly.

To relax your participants, have them talk to you on camera while they are doing something familiar to them like weeding the garden, or painting or drawing, cooking, riding a bicycle, walking the dog, etc. Keep your camera

running, even when the interview appears to end. Sometimes the most interesting things are said after the interview.

Other shooting

Your A roll consists of the main comments from participants; be sure to film lots and lots of what is called B roll. When a participant mentions, for example, a mountain, an animal, a river, a street, or an individual, you will want those specific shots to fill in as cutaways to give your interviews depth and punch. You can always come back another time and gather those cutaway shots. The idea here is to infuse variety into your film.

You don't want a dry procession of interviews. Film a local event, perhaps a high school parade. Write a song addressing the issues and have a local musician perform it. Create and film a few brief dramatic sequences related to the issues. Mix them with footage of your participants speaking, and make them fun! Your audience will appreciate these interludes, which will make your film more effective.

What NOT to do

Do NOT construct a story board or use narration. AVOID the conventional formulas film schools insist upon. They will only stifle your creative juices and joy. Instead, construct your story line from your interviews.

Do NOT use professional speakers or experts. They are boring, self serving and arrogant. You want to empower the grassroots participants and audience, not put them to sleep with numbers, monotone complexities and fancy language. People want to feel things, not be told things.

Do NOT provide balancing views on the issues. You are doing pure, idealistic advocacy on a very limited budget. Your opposition, usually corporate entities, have all the clout and money in the world and can spread their propaganda at will. Don't be surprised when they are the loudest complainers about how unbalanced your documentary is!

Editing and distribution

Transfer your best footage onto your hard drive. Use a simple program like iMovie to edit this footage into a coherent piece based entirely on your vision of

what coherent means. If you make certain that you like the final result, then all will be well.

Load your finished film into your computer burn program and crank out DVD copies to your heart's content. Copies will cost you less than a dime each! However, your work ain't worth much unless people see it . . . and it will never be seen on network TV or, I assure you, on PBS.

You will have to distribute your film locally, regionally and nationally via grassroots networks. And the secret to successful distribution is to interview and contact many, many people in your initial filmmaking because they are the prime movers for distribution. Your power is with the individuals who have bravely stood up to speak their minds in your film.

Supply each of these people with twenty or more dubs of the film. They are now supplied with ammo they can use to get the message out. And now, with your film in hand, these good people are motivated to act! They will pass out copies, mail off copies and will make certain that groups and individuals are watching the film and **PASSING IT AROUND**.

Be sure to mail off copies to the opposition. Oh, they'll love you for that! The impact and the distribution will grow. You'll receive requests for dubs and showings and you'll find that establishment media producers, including newspapers, radio and T.V., will pick up the issues. Stick at your computer and burn copies. You're on fire. Keep a fire extinguisher handy!

Set up showings at public libraries, public television access stations, community centers, people's homes, schools, bookstores, art galleries, churches, etc. Put out a collection box for donations to cover expenses. Have DVD copies at these events for people to pick up and distribute. Whatever time you have dedicated to producing your film, double or triple that time for distribution. And, oh yes, start planning your next film project!

And so you ask: "What is the power, what is the advantage of advocacy filmmaking?" In advocacy filmmaking, you are on the side of your participants, caring about their issues and concerns and thus winning their confidence. This confidence is the indispensable condition which balanced establishment media can never achieve. It is precisely this element of confidence which creates the potential for uniquely potent interviews and **REAL** documentaries.

GET ON THE ISSUES *BEFORE* THE DAMAGE IS DONE!

Gene Bernofsky Filmography

- 1966 Dropcity
- 1970 Glamour
- 1973 Civil War
- 1974 Tetrahedron
- 1977 Group
- 1980 Hierarchy
- 1981 1993
- 1982 Postmaster
- 1983 Lawrence of America
- 1984 Anodyne
- 1985 Neshnabek
- 1986 Indian/Indian
- 1987 I Never Saw the Buffalo
- 1988 Which Side Are You On?
- 1989 Shame on Montana
- 1990 Diet Coke Montana
- 1990 Gardens by the Smelter
- 1991 Undermining Yellowstone
- 1992 Abandoned
- 1994 A River Cries
- 1997 Red Thunder
- 1998 Swimming Woman
- 1999 Trembling Waters
- 2001 Dongo Kundu
- 2003 Cream of Feet
- 2004 Frontburner
- 2005 Gassing the Big Sky
- 2006 No Histrionics!
- 2007 Oh No Lolo
- 2009 Hear the Buffalo