



Center for Social Media

Making Your Media Matter 2008 Rapporteur's Report

by Kate Schuler

On February 7th and 8th, the Center for Social Media held its annual MAKING YOUR MEDIA MATTER conference. Read this Rapporteur's Report to learn about the topics discussed and watch video from the conference.

RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT

INTRODUCTION

On Feb 7 and 8, 2008, the Center for Social Media brought together a group of filmmakers, non-profit communication leaders, new media developers, foundation executives, and game developers to participate in a broad-ranging discussion about the future of media designed to engage the public and create a social impact.

The Center's fourth annual conference saw a name change, as the previous gatherings were called "Making Your Documentary Matter." Organizers believed that "Making Your Media Matter" better represented the intersection and collaboration of media makers in the digital media sphere. Gaming, new media, and documentaries no longer stand as completely separate entities.

This change is happening quickly, but it is one that filmmakers and non-profits should embrace, many panelists argued. Interactive media can serve to reach new audiences for filmmakers and enhance viewer participation – an outcome that will ultimately serve social causes and the public good.

"There is no easy map for the digital landscape, but as new forms of technology emerge and mutate, we have to create a shared vision of a vigorous and inclusive public culture," said American University School of Communication Dean Larry Kirkman. You can read those remarks [here](#).

As filmmakers, new media developers, game developers, non-profits, and funders all try to find their place in this developing environment, there is much room for collaboration. But determining outcomes will take time.

"We don't measure success by numbers, but by how it has impact and how it spreads out into the public space. Those are things you measure over time," said Orlando Bagwell of the Ford Foundation, one of the sponsors of the conference.

GAMES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Media makers are increasingly exploring how to harness the power of games to promote social change. As “documentary gaming” grows, game developers and filmmakers are finding their work intersecting in ways that can engage audiences perhaps more than either genre alone.

Suzanne Seggerman, president and co-founder of Games for Change, noted that digital gaming is a young medium – only about 30 years old – and is evolving quickly. “We’re at a place where we were with film in the 1960s and 70s,” she said. But broader recognition of the impact and benefits of digital gaming has moved the genre further into the mainstream. Gaming is not just for “boys in basements,” Seggerman pointed out, the average gamer is 33 years old. More universities are offering game design courses, museums are collecting games, and the MacArthur Foundation has begun to look at learning through digital games.

In terms of learning, Seggerman noted, you have a different cognitive process when you do something rather than hear or read something. Games allow you to explore new ideas and environments and do things you would not be able to do in the real world, allowing for “low-risk failures” when experimenting with complex scenarios and multiple variables, she said.

Given the power of games as a rich learning environment, Seggerman said that the medium can be harnessed for social change and civic engagement. Seggerman’s company Games For Change helps nurture the field by running an annual gaming festival as well as hosting a lab at The New School in New York – what has been called a “Sundance for games.” The goal is to bring non-profits and foundations into the conversation about how gaming can be used for social change and the public interest, and then develop and promote the medium. “Film was the dominant cultural form of the 20th century, interactive media will be the dominant cultural form of the 21st century,” she said.

Dennis Palmieri, director of communications for the Independent Television Service (ITVS), discussed Independent Lens’ entrance into the gaming landscape. As part of their web-only content, ITVS funded the month-long online alternate-reality game that explored what life would be like if the world ran out of oil. From April 30-June 1, 2007, 1,800 registered players from 12 countries actively participated in the game. The developers of World Without Oil created a shell for the game, framing a structure for such events as jumps in oil prices over the game’s timeframe.

But, Palmieri noted, users contributed most of the content themselves. Players created videos, graphics, and messages that they posted to the site as well as to their own blogs and outside sites such as YouTube. As a result, “people who aren’t even looking for the game came across it and got sucked into it,” Palmieri said.

“The name of the game is participation,” he added. “People aren’t all that satisfied to watch a piece of media, they want to be involved in shaping and creating that content. They want to have a role.”

A notable effect of the game was that players embraced the lessons learned from the simulated “oil crisis” and made concrete changes in their daily lives. Several users noted on the site that they had started biking instead of driving, begun composting, and had switched their cars to biodiesel since the game had been underway.

Following on the success of *World Without Oil*, ITVS will be offering more opportunities for viewers of its television programming to interact with its content. On the website for the upcoming documentary *King Corn*, visitors will be able to use clips from the film to create their own mash-ups about the health and agriculture issues raised in the movie.

Filmmaker-turned-game designer Heidi Boisvert hopes to reframe the immigration debate and teach young people about the effects of the 1996 immigration law through her game *ICED! (I Can End Deportation)*. A free downloadable 3-D role-playing game aimed at high school and college students, *ICED!* lets a player pick one of five different characters – each with a different immigration status such as asylum seeker, undocumented, or green card holder.

The object of the game is to stay out of trouble and gain citizenship. But the rules adhere closely to the 1996 laws, which expanded the types of crimes for which all immigrants can be detained and deported, and to the vagaries of the immigration and legal systems. So, there are pitfalls at every turn as characters move through daily life. Players are asked myth vs. fact questions about immigration as well as “moral decision” questions throughout the game. Incorrect answers increase the chance of getting caught and sent to the detention center. “Once in detention, the outcome is randomly programmed to reflect the inconsistencies of the legal terrain,” Boisvert said.

Boisvert enlisted the help of 100 youth throughout New York to test and develop the game – refining character profiles, game language and strategy. She also consulted immigration advocates and the game includes recordings of calls from detained immigrants at detention centers to give players a better sense of the effects of detention.

ICED! is being hosted by iBreakthrough.

Impact Games co-founder Eric Brown noted that his work in trying to promote social change through interactive media, what he called “documentary gaming,” presents several unique production challenges. *PeaceMaker*, a game about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, required building an engaging game, a teaching tool, and a political statement, all while remaining true to actual events.

PeaceMaker allows a player to play as either the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian president as events unfold in the region. The game is sold in over 60 countries and is being used in schools in the Middle East, and the company has a partnership with the non-profit Peres Center for Peace. “As a standalone game, it will open people’s mind, we believe,” he said.

In producing the game, Brown said he had to be mindful that much of the impact of the audience interaction comes from the connection to real life, so they incorporated real footage and videos from events in the Mideast.

Feedback from users suggests that the interactive decision-making and documentary elements of the game have been successful in helping players gain a deeper understanding of the conflict; many have noted they've learned more about the region from the game than from years of watching news. "Non-linear storytelling packs a lot of information in," Brown said.

The company's next project involves "how to understand the headlines through gaming," Brown said. Set up to resemble a news website, players can make predictions, add content, and give opinions as well as participate in the social networking element of the site.

Ivan Marovic, a founder of the student resistance movement that helped lead to the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, showcased a game he helped develop called A Force More Powerful, aimed at encouraging an understanding of non-violent problem solving. The goal of the game is to win a conflict with non-violent methods such as strikes, boycotts and protests.

A single-player strategy game, A Force More Powerful allows players to tailor their own scenarios in the game, allowing them to import maps of their own country and characteristics and images of their own politicians and political situations. "This game teaches two things – developing analytical skills by focusing on what's really important in a sea of info, and decision making," Marovic said.

Marovic became convinced of the power of games after he realized that while documentaries had the power to reach more people, they were not good training tools "because they only tell one story," he said. He wanted to provide a tool where people could make their own story with their own assumptions "challenging their own misconceptions about the possibility of the success of their own non nonviolent struggle."

Suzanne Seggerman noted that the game has been used in North Korea, Iran and Myanmar and is reaching activists around the world.

"It had a serious impact in places where other forms of exchange of information and experiences are very difficult," Marovic said.

Even with such success, panelists have found it hard to quantify a concrete impact of their games. Eric Brown suggested that it is still too early to tell much of the impact of the games, but that some of the most valuable feedback is coming from the community of the users. Heidi Boisvert will be conducting pre- and post-game playing surveys about young people's attitudes and understanding about immigration in order to try to judge the impact of her game. But Dennis Palmieri suggested that it might not be necessary to quantify impact at this point. "Is it our responsibility to come up with quantitative ways to measure cultural change? I have yet to see any reliable way to measure anyone's transformative experience," he said.

Audience member Danny Ledonne, creator of a game about the Columbine school shootings, challenged the idea that video games needed to be "socially pleasurable" and asked the panel to comment on the idea of games that might offend some people.

“There will always be people that just want entertainment movies, just like some people will intentionally go to art films, intentionally go to documentary films because they choose to challenge themselves that way,” said Eric Brown. “As [games] become prevalent everywhere, it will be a lot easier to have those different genres for whoever wants to consume them, but at least [the games] will be there for people to experience.” Eric Brown said.

Palmieri added, “This is why it’s important to preserve public funding for media for people who want to provoke.”

PLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

Disturbing and difficult topics in film – including the sexuality of handicapped teens, menstruation, and citizens working for peace in the Mideast – by nature make it harder to draw an audience. The panel of filmmakers discussed the importance of creating such films, and the strategies they use to bring their message to viewers.

Julia Bacha co-directed *Encounter Point*, a film about Israelis and Palestinians who are trying to work for nonviolent solutions to the crisis in the Mideast. *Encounter Point* was a response to the idea that media coverage of the conflict “always focuses on high-level political actions and violence,” she said, “but the reality is there are thousands of people actively involved in trying to change the situation.”

The film opened at the Tribeca Film Festival and played at several festivals before going onto DVD. They also developed an educational component to go with it that included classroom guides.

By using those two tracks, the film was covered in major media outlets like the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and on television news. The film was also broadcast in the Arab world. Bacha said she considers it a success because she was trying to “provide a platform for these people to become more effective in their work.”

Salome Chasnoff of BeyondMedia Education works with marginalized people in community settings to teach documentary filmmaking to collaborate on film projects and then work with them on distribution.

She worked with a group of handicapped teenage girls. “They were afraid to speak in the small group at the beginning, at the end they were training large groups on how to work with people with disabilities,” Chasnoff said.

The second piece was with a younger group of handicapped girls that explored their sexuality as handicapped women.

A piece BeyondMedia did with sex workers was used to advocate for the passage of three pieces of legislation in Illinois. “Seeing them as experts in a movie allowed [legislators] to open their minds and their hearts,” said Chasnoff.

But the subject was still too difficult for some. The film won a documentary competition in Chicago and was slated to screen on a PBS affiliate. But the channel decided it was too sensitive. After being deluged with complaints, the station relented.

“When we saw groundswell of support, we called a meeting, we thought we had a media justice movement,” Chasnoff said.

Chasnoff also noted that the process of making the films themselves is part of the outreach efforts. “The doc is not just about the issue, but also documents the process of making the movie. So you can see the outreach process in the movie itself,” she said.

Giovanna Chesler, whose project *Period: The End of Menstruation* addresses the topic of the trend in menstruation suppression, admitted her film is “a hard sell.”

“Luckily, I’m an academic,” she said, noting that her film was partially funded by academic support. But funding was the most difficult part of the process.

Because the topic is generally so unapproachable, she tried to enable the audience to embody the person onscreen by focusing mainly on voices. She also tried to prompt discussion by showing women onscreen talking about the issue, a moment she hoped would be recreated by women who watched it.

Although the film was rejected by every film festival, it was picked up by distributors and is now the third top selling film with Cinema Guild, she said. There was also press coverage in the *New York Times* and for three days it was the most e-mailed story. Such interest, she said, indicated that people really are interested in talking about the topic, even if it appears to be difficult at first.

Her next project is an interactive media project about HPV and other STDs to try to use entertainment to change sexual behavior.

Bristol Baughan, head of documentary film at GOOD magazine, had a different perspective from other panelists. GOOD is a for-profit company, so her focus is taking socially relevant content and making it profitable. Their work is also design-heavy, “taking stories of people from around the world doing good and making it popular and interesting,” she said.

The goal is to “sit in a documentary and feel like you’re watching a feature film,” Baughan said. “We have to think what will people want to pay \$10 to want to see?”

Their first film, by Michael Apter, *The World 2006*, looked at the state of the world through soccer. Their current film examines NASCAR through the story of three young racers from different socioeconomic backgrounds. They also plan to do more work with shorter films and online videos.

As for following up on the issues once they get people engaged, Baughan said they avoid a direct call to action. “We want to give people tools but not tell them to use them. We’re trying to create a sense of community by working with non-profits who are already doing the work,” she said.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: HIP-HOP: BEYOND BEATS AND RHYMES

Byron Hurt began making his film *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* with the intention of using it for outreach to young people and “to really get people to think critically about images and representations of manhood in hip hop culture,” he said.

A partnership with Sonya Childress of Firelight Media really helped the effort take off, but it was not easy. Constant appearances at screenings and tireless work with partners who shared their goals resulted in increased viewership of the film and its use in awareness campaigns.

“My goal was to make a film that spoke to young people in a powerful way,” Hurt said.

“You have to be strategic and find ways to invade the culture that looks like what people want to watch but has a subversive message,” he said.

He is careful to point out, however, that he is a big fan of hip-hop.

Childress noted that Hurt was really an ideal person to get the outreach effort off the ground on the issue. His status as an African-American male and a fan of hip-hop gave him credibility, and he had had previous experience with training young men about issues of violence and homophobia.

The film itself also lent itself extremely well to a campaign – it had great storytelling, he divided the film into modular sections, and it was a timely story that no one had told all at once. “He was already thinking about how the film was going to be used as he was making it,” Childress said.

The film played at Sundance and was broadcast on PBS in February 2007. Part of the challenge for ITVS was to try to attract Hurt’s target audience – young people of color – to PBS without alienating PBS’s typical audience. ITVS partnered with Firelight Media and the National Black Programming Consortium for the task. “We decided to focus on service providers and educators already working with young people,” Childress said, noting that the 16 groups they collaborated with included LGBT groups, Boys and Girls Clubs, and hip-hop organizations. “It was the first time many of them had been in the same room together,” she said.

They developed a high school curriculum and a website where kids can critique lyrics and put up their own. In the eight months leading up to broadcast, there were 400 screenings. Boys and Girls clubs alone showed it 150 times. They also put banner ads on websites such as BET advertising the broadcast. Screenings at universities were packed and required overflow rooms. At one screening organized by GenderPAC, the DVD player broke, and yet 150 people stayed in the room for a lively 90-minute conversation about a film they didn’t see. “This is a film that young people have really been waiting for,” said Childress. “And organizations on the front line have been praying for this kind of film to be made.”

About 780,000 tuned in for the broadcast, Childress said.

“Maybe not so many young people of color saw it. Had we started earlier we might have been more successful,” she said. Another problem, she said, was that there was little to keep viewers engaged once the broadcast was over.

But in an unprecedented move, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting gave them funding for another year of outreach.

Then “the Don Imus situation happened” a month after the broadcast, Childress said, and Hurt became the “expert” to talk to about the hip-hop Imus had blamed for his remarks.

“Everyone mentioned the film to use to dissect the issue,” she said. “The real measure of success became how much it was influencing the national dialogue, not the broadcast.”

For the second year of outreach, they have been working on solutions and on bringing organizations together that can seed a movement.

Audience members were interested in whether there had been any negative reactions from artists or record executives, but Hurt said there had not. “I thought there would be more backlash, but the film does a good job of making it difficult to attack me because the critique is coming from a sense of love for the community and the music.”

CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Nenad Maksimovic, of the Academy for Educational Development, spoke about a project that brings teams from local Serbian and Albanian television stations together to create media on social issues important to both sides. The production also creates a space for inter-community dialogue and problem solving while exploring potential “connectors” and “dividers” that can be trigger points. Maksimovic said important lessons learned from the project are that issues must be presented honestly without sensation; producers must maintain impartiality above all else; and that it is imperative to put a human face on the issue.

CooperaTiVa is a reality series that uses an Apprentice model to promote inter-ethnic cooperation. The goal is to allow people to build several different levels of identity as they cooperate on different tasks in an entertaining format.

Virginia Williams, of New View Films talked about the challenges with producing Frontrunner, a film about Massouda Jalal, a woman running for president of Afghanistan.

“Inter-cultural understanding is a two way street,” she said. “The biggest goal I had was to make something I could screen in Afghanistan as well.” Williams noted that in this sense, her film was successful. Jalal is happy with the finished piece and is excited to have it screened in her country. She contrasted that with the fictional movie Kiterunner, which can’t be shown in Afghanistan.

The filming itself required cultural sensitivity. Williams noted that she did need the help of an Afghan journalist, an insider, who could help her gain access and insight.

Outreach for the film includes a leadership training and online social media project called “Be a Frontrunner” aimed at girls aged 10-14. The site encourages young girls to create media and events related to advocacy issues.

When Senain Kheshgi, a Pakistani-American filmmaker, and Geeta Patel, an Indian-American filmmaker, set out to make a documentary about Kashmir four years ago, neither of them knew much about what was going on in the region. The friends quickly decided they would have to travel to the region to truly understand the conflict.

As the pair traveled through the disputed region examining issues of religious and cultural conflict and human rights, “it triggered things within us that we didn’t want to acknowledge,” Kheshgi said, meaning that each of them began to identify more with their heritage as they learned more about the conflict.

Their personal stories became part of the film, titled Project Kashmir.

“We realized the point of talking about this conflict. Our friendship is a metaphor for that. You have to be able to talk things out, acknowledge you have differences,” said Patel.

In their film they travel to places such as military checkpoints where the Indian army is cracking down on Pakistanis.

As part of the outreach for the film, they want to reveal the divide and the need for dialogue among the community and to work for a safe place where people can come and tell their stories and record their histories, the filmmakers said.

Caroline Avakian of FilmAid International discussed the benefits of working with refugees to make films about their experiences. Her organization works with refugees, mainly in East and Central Africa, to help the write, shoot, and edit narrative films that reflect their lives in the camps. The project “uses the power of film and video to educate and empower refugees,” she said.

The films are then shown in large outdoor venues in the camps, as well as targeted daytime screenings to reach women and girls with films addressing sexual and gender-based violence. “This is a really useful way to communicate vital messages on health and social issues,” Avakian said.

Avakian said that a survey her organization did showed that 96 percent of respondents said they felt the screenings in the camps helped with conflict resolution and community building and that 67 percent believed the films were useful in getting people tested for HIV.

SHORT SHORTS AND HOT PLATFORMS

As seen in the panel on Gaming for Social Change, technology and multimedia platforms are merging and changing so quickly that media makers have to be nimble and ready to adjust to the evolving tastes of various audiences.

Daniel Hartman of See3 Communications moderated this panel and noted that repurposing content for multiple platforms is increasingly important because it allows you to not only leverage existing assets, but also to reach different audiences.

Matisse Bustos Hawkes of WITNESS discussed their new project, the Hub. Launched in December 2007, the Hub allows anyone to upload human rights-related content as safely and privately as possible – they don't keep IP address information to avoid being forced to turn it over to governments.

WITNESS already has a YouTube channel, she said, but they wanted to go beyond that and have a site that is better at “contextualizing” and starting conversations. They also wanted to be able to add functionality such as being able to start a campaign or send emails after viewing a video.

Leba Haber, filmmaker and interaction designer, started her project *Where My Ladies At?*, three years ago to look at how pornography and the sex industry were intersecting with hip-hop. The project has constantly been evolving, she noted, with 45 minutes of narrative film and 45 minutes of documentary film on the site, along with real and fictional blog entries and comment boards.

The site launched in August 2007 and ran in real time for a month. The project also has an educator's guide and a historical segment. Haber also included extensive forums and has asked artists and community organizers to join forum discussions. She also made a point to invite people with opposing points of views to lead forums, she said.

Melissa Roberts, of Free Range Studios, showcased the company's latest video “The Story of Stuff.” The film is a 22 minute online documentary that follows environmental analyst Annie Leonard as she explains her personal journey to understanding the effects of manufacturing and disposal. Roberts called the production “an entertaining journey of the way we make, use, and throw away stuff.” Purposefully distributed online only – to avoid creating “more stuff” – the piece includes animation that users can click on at anytime to learn more about the subject being talked about or find citations for the facts Leonard is using.

To get the word out about the site, Free Range Studios used personal pitches to targeted media such as “mommy blogs.”

Leighton Woodhouse of Brave New Films screened *War on Greed*, a 7-minute documentary asking viewers to sign a petition to end tax breaks for the corporate buyout industry. *War on Greed* is part of Brave New Films' new effort to experiment with short documentaries. Woodhouse offered three specific take home lessons for effective political documentaries: fix onto a single target to use to draw larger lessons, use a narrative structure, and give people a clear way to take action.

In response to a question from the audience about the one-sided nature of the film, Woodhouse noted, “Our goal is not to create PBS-style documentaries. We do these with a strong point of view to create a discussion.”

CONCLUSION

While conference participants were overall enthusiastic and excited by the possibilities offered by gaming and new media platforms, most people were reluctant to give up on traditional film outlets. There was a definite sense that new media should co-exist with the old as long as possible. Audience members as well as panelists said there was value in the collective viewing experience of movie screenings and community building.

But the excitement created by the panels about emerging platforms and gaming showed that the imagination of media makers concerned with social change has been engaged. We have only begun to see how media makers will take the opportunity to reach new audiences and engage with viewers in new ways to work for public engagement and social justice.

They developed a high school curriculum and a website where kids can critique lyrics and put up their own. In the eight months leading up to broadcast, there were 400 screenings. Boys and Girls clubs alone showed it 150 times. They also put banner ads on websites such as BET advertising the broadcast. Screenings at universities were packed and required overflow rooms. At one screening organized by GenderPAC, the DVD player broke, and yet 150 people stayed in the room for a lively 90-minute conversation about a film they didn't see. "This is a film that young people have really been waiting for," said Childress. "And organizations on the front line have been praying for this kind of film to be made."