

# A MOSAIC OF PRACTICES: PUBLIC MEDIA AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE



Once the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, had approved my proposal to begin a planned seven-year process of making a documentary about a group of women majoring in the sciences and technology at Ohio State University (OSU), it occurred to me that I was going to have to do more than just show up in their dorms and classrooms with a camera crew a few times a year until they graduated. After many individual meetings with interested freshman students with whom I'd been connected through the University Honors Program, I invited several young women to consider taking part in the film project. Before they left school that summer, I recorded interviews with each of them, posing the question, "When you look back at your childhood, what brought you to your interest in science, technology, engineering, and math?"

We started meeting in the fall of 1998, at the start of the young women's sophomore year. Since I lived in California I could only visit OSU four times each year but within a few meetings we became the "Gender Chip Project," twelve students who agreed to form, with me, a temporary "cluster"—not a club, a class, a peer learning or advocacy group—that would meet in person regularly to reflect on the process of their studies. While the original impetus that brought us together was the making of a film spanning their college careers, what kept us

together was the group's participatory and largely fluid nature as a community, operating completely under and around official university culture. The students allowed me to glimpse their all-consuming undergraduate lives and eagerly took part in the forums and variety of interview and dialogue situations I devised.

Even though they couldn't articulate it at the time, the women at OSU seemed extremely interested to momentarily consider glimpses of the longer view of how, why, and what they were striving for in their respective fields, as well as any personal change or growth they were experiencing in the university environment. Even though we didn't talk about the form and function of the group itself, it became clear during our first year together that the Gender Chip Project was becoming an important part of their lives. None had the interest or time to take part in the actual documentary production, but by cohering as a "group," which had started with curious individuals who then became closer friends, the students engaged personally with each other and in their other peer groups in a dialogue process that was to transform the

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**ABOVE**

From Scribe Video's *Precious Places* Project



nature of the documentary project. By staying with the loose cluster we were calling the Gender Chip Project, their ongoing participation also changed their perspectives on their college experience in science, technology, engineering, and math (i.e., STEM majors) and their own personal definitions of success in their fields.

Although I had thought I would be exploring stories of triumph and adversity as most observational, longitudinal documentaries tend to do, a completely different set of stories began to emerge. I was uncomfortable and often unsure about what I was hearing, but adventurous enough to stay with the generational challenge to assumptions I took for granted as a progressive feminist shaped by the baby boom generation. My preconceived ideas were politely ignored, repurposed, and questioned as the young participants found their own voices to take over the dialogue and discover a protected space to make the inquiry and exploration into the world of STEM their own. While I often wished I could control the kind of “material” I was recording to fit into my original design, I dimly realized that I was dealing with a “new generation” with a different set of priorities, experiences, and purposes than anything I had seen before. Rather than play bewildered and parental, I simply decided to watch and listen carefully and not interject my own perspective.

The *Gender Chip Project* documentary that began in the late 1990s during the first big growth period of the Internet—with all its early utopian and mercantile aspirations—was completed three months before September 11, 2001, and was finally released for distribution in 2006. The hopes and dreams for the first class of the new century had been eclipsed by the catastrophic 9/11 attacks and over the next four years there was little interest in funding the completion of a film about young women entering the fields of science and technology. This fact forced me to change my approach toward getting the film completed and out into the world.

Through a long and often tedious process of trial and error, of untold funding applications being prepared and rejected, I learned to open

up my thinking about how the practice of “community-building” with collaborators and partners—from the creative inception to its “long tail” of distribution<sup>1</sup>—is now one of the most important ways to redefine the success of a nonfiction media project in an era of digitally networked culture.

My experience with the Gender Chip Project started by bringing together young women who would be the subjects for the documentary. Through our three years together doing reflection and inquiry about their fields, they changed the nature of the film project, and were also transformed by participating in it. The spirit of this kind of open dialogue, which was woven into the project from the beginning, was to inform how I constructed the edited film and how it would be framed and offered once it was completed.

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Over the last few years I have taken part in gatherings with other Bay Area nonfiction filmmakers, public broadcasters, and funders to find ways to collaborate and move independent projects more easily through the production and distribution pipeline and then connect the work to new users. It struck me that making an independent documentary (or any film for that matter) in these times is like conceiving, designing, and building a three-dimensional structure or system with a variety of moving parts and launching it like a startup organization. The film must be able to live in and around a variety of venues, from the Web to large theatrical screens, from disks to hard drives and mobile devices. It must appeal to the funders, who need to justify costs to their boards, and be able to be used by a variety of communities of interest. It may have to serve policy agendas, but also reveal stories from and about people who have no narrative presence in media otherwise.

Given these daunting expectations (both personally by the filmmaker to somehow make change in the world and by the funders to make a huge impact), I often wonder why I continue to return to independently conceived and created nonfiction filmmaking. Perhaps it is because it always holds a promise of being an unpredictable and mysterious process. It stimulates curiosity and opens up unexpected dialogue and connections. A completed documentary that touches people can be a powerful tool for personal and social transformation. And now these works are able to thrive in environments—both virtual and physical—where such films had no place even a short time ago. The documentary form is also malleable and fun to play with in the way a story can be revealed; and information, knowledge, or experience is explored through various levels of understanding.

The ways we develop a sustained and imaginative engagement with our audiences are also constantly changing: creativity and experimentation have to be applied at every phase of this three-dimensional project. In a broadband world where film is migrating to the Web and fully converging with audio, still images, and text, and where social networking sites that allow anyone to upload and share video clips proliferate, the question of how we make our media have abiding and transformative meaning to thicken public discourse in the real places where we live and work becomes more urgent than ever.



To make matters more exciting to some and panic-inducing to others, we are also experiencing a transitional period when mediamaking is becoming, as scenario planning practitioner Lawrence Wilkinson describes it, “more of an activity that many will participate in, and less of a profession open only to the highly trained and well-financed.”<sup>2</sup> In the historically fragile world of noncommercial or independent public media, where it has always been a struggle to learn the craft and business of filmmaking and get projects completed, distributed, and paid attention to, currents of fear are tightly intertwined with glimmers of opportunity.

The new digital technologies are swiftly forcing the institutional structures that contain media to reconfigure and these traditional public media funders are not yet willing to risk the capital necessary to help creators build the new three-dimensional structures (functionality on multiple platforms, engagement campaigns, and complex distribution arrangements) that are demanded. Digital media now shapes every aspect of our lives, intimately, as well as in spectacle. Consequently, funders tend to see media space as a means to an end rather than an end in itself that can build and strengthen strong localized infrastructures and capture important public memories and histories not controlled by consumer and commercial market concerns.

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The concept of “mass communications” or reaching a large audience is no longer useful either, especially for the independent mediamaker. Our audiences are now small, targeted, and as passionate about our subject as we are. When media analyst Andrew Blau, in a report written for the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, sees our developing global media environment, he notes the decoupling between cultural and economic success that has defined our assumptions about how to judge the contribution a media work can make and the economic value it might hold:

In the current environment and even more so in the future, work could be culturally successful—that is, it could gain widespread public attention, shape debate, even affect the course of current events—without being commercially successful ... similarly, in the emerging environment, one could develop or aggregate niche audiences over wide areas that would cover the costs and return a profit to the makers or funders of independent work without the work itself ever becoming widely known.<sup>3</sup>

Since public funding throughout the American arts ecology has been curtailed in the present climate, it is extremely challenging—some would argue almost impossible—for the individual filmmaker to find grant-like or commissioning capital to initiate a single documentary project, unless the filmmaker wants to take up several years of his or her life looking and facing repeated rejection. Since there are so many people, amateur to professional, who are creating documentaries with easily available tools, it is no longer enough or even wise for an independent filmmaker to only pursue the typical system of rewards: win production funding, complete a film, travel the festivals, get a distributor, and leverage the attention into the next project, which one expects will be bigger and more professionally meaningful. These traditional models are no longer



lenient or particularly useful to be able to create work and bring it to motivated and engaged viewers.

Yet, often out of creative, moral, or political necessity, filmmakers want to make certain films where they control the content and the ownership, or perhaps even the distribution and outreach materials. Even if the first goal is to simply make that film, filmmakers must be ready to assume the entire production risk (time, labor, and money) and hope to find interested funds here and there until the work slowly arrives to completion. As most veteran documentary filmmakers will admit, it is a game not usually won to tangible satisfaction, especially when measured against the attributes of commercial success. There is no financial safety net for the creator here. It is a huge risk to take on if one is expecting that the project will sell to a broadcast or theatrical distributor to pay back upfront costs and gain a foothold for the next project. Without a stable infrastructure of people and organizations to support, promote, and distribute the work while it is created, the filmmaker is a hobbyist who occasionally manages to complete a film and hopes to sell it alongside any number of other more commercially driven products.

The values that motivate this kind of documentary practice rarely intersect with the values of the commercial media marketplace and only in occasional instances coincide. While the gates are more open now in terms of accessible and affordable mediamaking tools, other less visible obstacles emerge to discourage professional entry into the official system of rewards. The official support system (public television services and programs, cable channels like HBO, the Sundance documentary fund, and a variety of prestige festivals and distributors), while having benefits for those who can gain entry, still allows very few makers and new works through its portals and rare are those who can sustain a career over a lifetime in independent nonfiction filmmaking.

To acknowledge the other side of the equation, traditional independent media funders (foundations, state and federal government grantors,

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From Scribe Video's *Precious Places* Project

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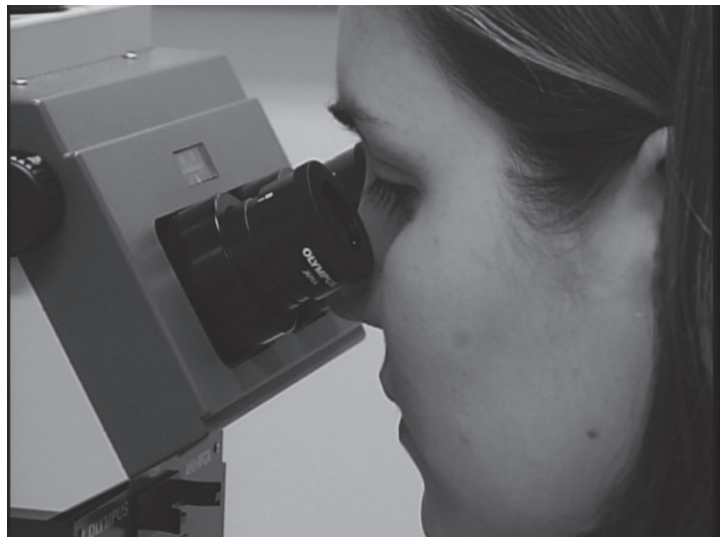
and some adventurous individual donors or investors) are increasingly risk-averse and unsure about where to invest, if at all, in the reconfiguring media ecology. They are no longer certain where their money should go when it comes to media creation—to the producer, a nonprofit organization, or a broadcast entity? Some might say that too many projects have fallen short and not lived up to their promises, especially around distribution, but only slowly are we learning how to evaluate success in the changing relationship between mass and niche audiences and the new roles that artists take on in relation to individuals and communities that embrace their work. Thus, most funders will no longer justify risking early entry into a project, but prefer to wait until it is almost completed, when they can see the finished work and decide if they are interested in contributing financially. This usually means modest funding for promotional “outreach” or marketing, but hardly enough to support the work the filmmaker has already invested in herself.

To move away from seeing these issues only in bleak or crisis terms, I see the disassembling of entrenched systems as a way to invigorate and reconsider the work we produce within the cultural infrastructure. Disruptions—technological, demographic, and economic—give new meaning and motivation to the work we do as artists, advocates, educators, and entrepreneurs in the independent public media sphere. They also force us to consider new ways to build community through the films that we make by creating new pathways for openness and connection where there might have been none. In turn, the form and style of the documentary itself is reinvigorated when we touch and engage with user-participants from the beginning of the process of creation.

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As ideas about and new tools for participatory media, social networking, and community-building are capturing our imaginations and transforming the on-line and digital world, it helps to understand how so many similar kinds of collaborative practices were pioneered, developed, and refined over the last thirty years throughout the independent media world in local communities and arts organizations. Precisely because global networks of like-minded people can now cluster and form communities on-line, the activity of working deeply and locally—“in real life”—takes on a greater and more profound importance. Independent filmmakers, often involved with cinematic experimentalism as well as populist activism, have insistently developed ways to create collaborative projects since the 1970s, when the media arts movement began building organizations and emerging cable systems were mandated to provide public access channels in communities throughout the country.

Our new and swiftly evolving social-networking technologies are forcing us to look not only toward the future, but also give fresh attention to past and current mediamaking practices that are already rooted in real face-to-face community building. By rethinking their meaning and renewing or linking to practices media artists have developed in localized community settings, we can influence and help strengthen public and alternative spaces within the digital media landscape. Community media collaborations (organizing groups, building teams, creating dialogues, co-authoring media stories, etc.) where individuals from a neighborhood, town, or city can recognize themselves and bring to the surface their deepest aspirations, will once again become



a powerful differentiator for giving a boost to the public commons of which media is such an integral part.

Many who have been fortunate enough to continue producing independent documentaries over decades have been drawn to the form because it is possible to work from “inside,” building relationships with individuals and groups. The stance is one where the artist collaborates with communities to conceptualize a recognizable story or to teach people how to gain access to tools, archives, and distribution channels and “make media themselves.” The principle and ideal at the core of this practice, which began to emerge in the 1970s and has developed unabated since then, is to use the tools of media for individual and group self-determination. This has always been a powerful and dangerous concept to keep at the center of our society, where the free flow of images and information is always under threat by corporate (and even governmental) forces that wish to control, resist, and monetize access to historic film, archives, and distribution outlets, both broadcast and on the Internet.

A film project can bring disparate community members together around common interests or histories. A video work is able to be an artmaking project or take on a political issue. A media project can plan to stimulate dialogue where there hadn’t been any and help to change policy. Over and over this kind of media work stimulates imaginative responses, dialogue, and action in the larger cultural and social environment and defies the commonly held idea that media is only about passive entertainment. It creates a place where the exchange of experience and knowledge mediated by visual storytelling forms can expand people’s understanding and awareness of the world around them. Working within this framework, media would perform differently than what we’ve been trained to expect from it.

When young idealistic artists, media educators, and activists started forming organizations in the 1970s and ‘80s that offered access to production tools, they also started inventing new ways to collaborate across organizations and get people involved in the process of producing.

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From the *Gender Chip* Project

Community media organizations like Appalshop in Kentucky, Scribe Video in Philadelphia, and Community Film Workshop of Chicago, and youth media training programs like Educational Video Center and Downtown Community Television Center in New York, Film In the Cities in Minnesota, and Visual Communications in Los Angeles began to be important communication nodes that balanced creative and unusual uses of new technologies, aspirations of mediamakers, and the desires or needs of the communities with which they were working. Public access centers across the country also began to train a generation of novice producers, citizen activists, and new immigrants in the techniques of highly localized media engagement.

Documentary filmmakers with an interest in collaborating with subject participants as equals have created hundreds of ways to bring people into the process of constructing the visual stories of their lives. One of the great practices of independent filmmaking has always been its close-up emphasis on local communities and teaching nonprofessionals how to make films while experimenting with unusual visual approaches. No longer limited to theater and television, they can now be experienced and discussed in a variety of venues where people congregate, and through the Internet groups, can be alerted and invited to screenings in moments. Digital technology untethered the medium, and now film can be installed, repurposed, and reinterpreted because of its constantly changing and fluid relationship to both physical place and audience participants.

Rather than feeling the panic of being caught in a riptide of change, nonfiction filmmakers have more to gain than ever before by working more deeply with collaborative and participatory models, and experimenting within the proliferation of interactive, blurring, mobile, and untamed places where media can now seep. Since we honestly can't predict what will happen with any certainty, we have to imagine new ways of asserting what "public media" means in our privatized society and how it might be equipped to resurrect the ideals of citizen engagement and community obligations. And pragmatically, we have to dance between the issues of proprietary ownership of our creative work and the promises of "open-source mediamaking." A work in progress, indeed.

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After the majority of production shooting was completed for the *Gender Chip Project*, my strategy to complete the film as soon as I could was to create a trailer, write grants, get funding, get a distributor, go to festivals, get a broadcast, and move on to the next project. I made a trailer and then endlessly wrote grants, but there was absolutely no interest in this project from any of the funding entities I had worked with in the past. The post-9/11 world was changing quickly, especially in the way foundations approached assisting the development of independently made documentary projects. The Bush government, the threat of terrorism, the escalation of new digital technologies and Internet distribution, a distracted audience base—all these elements, plus others, created an atmosphere of funder risk aversion and extreme caution when contributing anything to the arts—especially the media arts (which are viewed as both high risk and having high stakes in terms of return on investment). From my experience, private foundations do not care to invest in films (or filmmakers) unless it is a subject they care about and is part of their overall program. Some public funding agencies

still employ review panels, and for the filmmaker, if and when she may be chosen, it is more like winning a lottery than anything else.

When my producing partners at Media Working Group and I finally received interest and eventually funding from the National Science Foundation for a package of multimedia activities, the *Gender Chip Project* documentary was only one part of the bundle. Besides the Web site and a variety of toolkits and resources related to the subject, we created a public engagement plan to bring the film not only into distribution, but to a wide range of constituent organizations that could use it in a variety of settings—from classrooms to libraries, professional organizations, after-school programs, science centers, and community outreach programs.

It was the experience of developing partners and collaborations and designing a complex outreach plan that led me to pay attention to organizations developing models to help filmmakers do this. Active Voice and Working Films are two organizations challenging documentarians to examine traditional (i.e., twentieth-century) notions of cinematic success, and are experimenting with and improving alternative modes of creating and getting the work to audiences. By collaborating with them, they are teaching filmmakers ways to begin thinking about this piece of the process even before a film is begun.

Ellen Schneider, founder of Active Voice, a nonprofit organization devoted to using independent documentary successfully in the wider theater of social change movements, sees cinematic nonfiction storytelling as an unusually powerful force to "put a human face on public policy and move discussion away from partisan and conflict-oriented journalism."<sup>4</sup> She favors working with richly textured, focused works that offer multiple perspectives and create space for the viewer to discover their own relationship to the story. Films that have been broadcast on public television and cable, which she and her team have also put into other viewing environments, include Allen Blumberg's *The New Americans* (2002), Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini's *Farmingville* (2004), and Don McBrearty's *Chasing Freedom* (2004). (Active Voice also created our Action Toolkit for the *Gender Chip Project*). She wants to place independent documentaries, which are often highly crafted and extremely sophisticated and deserve much more attention than what one broadcast allows, at the center of local and national policy debates. When nonfiction films are interestingly attached to mainstream debates and dialogues, they do what they do best: burrow deep into feelings and thoughts through narrative form and perhaps spark new connections among people who do not have much in common around a particular issue.

For the fiercely independent filmmaker (probably one who would be able to finance their own production), Active Voice's new pilot project would not appeal. But for the rest of us who depend on a mix of foundation, broadcast, and public financing, it may offer a way to find and work with partners we might not have known were allies. Schneider is developing a process where Active Voice brings filmmakers together with specific policymakers, funders, think tanks, and community organizers from the beginning of the project—not after the film has been shot and is in rough-cut form, but ideally just as the project is beginning to be conceptually shaped. By creating a safe dialogue environment where filmmakers listen to and incorporate



perspectives that may complicate and frame their subject matter considerably, they might be lucky enough to create trust and a bond of security with policymakers and funders usually reluctant to get involved in what are perceived as uncertain and risky documentary projects. By starting a dialogue early on about a documentary's usability in the real world (after the fantasia of festivals, broadcast, and maybe even a theatrical release), the filmmaker can design a media project that lives vividly, travels broadly, and works hard as a catalyst for understanding and action on a particular issue.

Robert West, co-founder and Executive Director of Working Films, a nine-year-old organization that works with the principle that a documentary can have a significant impact beyond isolated film festivals if creatively woven into the work of social justice and community efforts, asks documentarians and advocates, "How can this film get out into the world to help the world?" Since independent filmmakers often work in isolation, immersed in their subject matter, funding and writing proposals, and trying to get the film completed, it is not easy to develop relationships with the very social issue organizations that can become the base for the film's continuing reach into the world. Public engagement and outreach planning are the farthest from a filmmaker's thinking when beginning the process, but now these may become one of the most important links to get the film completed and distributed, and most importantly, used by people.

West and Working Films' other co-founder, Judith Helfand, realized this when they developed a major outreach campaign for *Blue Vinyl* (2002), Helfand's personal documentary about the plastic material PVC and its link to the toxin dioxin. Even now, several years after its broadcast, the producers can measure the impact the film has had in continuing to organize consumer groups across the country to demand building materials that are healthy and nontoxic.

They now work with filmmakers to build, from conception, relationships with advocacy organizations, and what West calls "unexpected allies"—those who can commit to using the film in the field by buying and giving away DVDs, hosting screenings and panels, connecting screenings to field work on the ground, and publicizing and spreading the word among supporters and other interested users. Although the filmmaker may be making the film for personal motivations, while in this arena, thinking shifts into the "real world" of politics, organizing, and persuasion to work with advocacy professionals to figure out ways

that the film can be rolled out in non-traditional, yet highly meaningful environments—all of which can take three years or more.

These campaigns are not built by the filmmakers or even Working Films, which typically acts as an intermediary to forge alliances of interest. Organizations and campaigns are realizing, albeit slowly, that they need great screenworthy stories to give emotional depth to their issue, and that they can, at the same time, contribute to the completion of a great cultural artifact, a film that speaks to all kinds of people. Filmmakers are realizing that funders will not contribute to a project unless they see a highly developed outreach plan to disseminate the work in a broad and sophisticated way that takes advantage of the Internet, community building, webs of personal relationships, and plain old organizing.

Having developed a methodology to bring filmmakers, institutions, and organizations together, Working Films trains the organizations to produce game plans to use the films in a wide and innovative variety of settings (from mobile devices to churches, schools, community centers, libraries, special events, etc.) and develop resources for distribution at screenings and on the Internet, always asking, "How can this film help our issue?" and what are the "next actions" to take that are meaningful to and doable for the engaged and inspired audience members. Working Films operates under the principle that, although they are participants in the process of getting the film out to new audiences, filmmakers do not have to become outreach strategists and implementers. Nor do nonprofit organizations have to create their own films.

Active Voice and Working Films offer strategy, partnership matchmaking for long term relationships, and the service of being the much-needed intermediary between the creative filmmaking team and the advocacy networks that can use the work to open up dialogue and set the stage for inspired action. Filmmakers cannot imagine how this will play out ahead of time, but, as both these organizations prove, success can come from putting in place a protocol to bring all sides together in the spirit of open-source teamwork.

I am attracted to the models Active Voice and Working Films provide because the idea that my work can jump out of the boundaries that I think define it and confine it (success at festivals, a distribution deal, broadcast sales, and awards) and continue to grow and become influential and even transformative in ways I never could have imagined, is extraordinary and exciting. But these models mean—at the same time—that the filmmaker must be willing to cede absolute control in varying ways, from the beginning of the process onward. This type of practice requires a shift in thinking for the independent producer and the various collaborators. Everyone must be in agreement that the creator, or creative team, is not simply there to serve the advocates of one or another position around an issue—at least not in this model, which is not about producing a sponsored and/or client project. Nor is the filmmaker the center of attraction, the omniscient media professional. In this model, the filmmaker and community collaborators assume a stance of equality while undertaking the project, seeing a creative arc from production to presentation and

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From the *Gender Chip* Project



distribution to ways that “users” can shape it into their worlds. It is an assumption that while the director is the storyteller in the grander scheme, other equally important participants are helping to ensure that the documentary can be designed to work in places and ways that the filmmaker may never have even considered or imagined.

Perhaps control is no longer what the independent mediamaking process is about, but rather constantly reworking the enterprise as new inputs come in and change the dynamic relationship between the self-identified filmmaker and those whom journalist and professor Jay Rosen calls, “people formerly known as audiences.”<sup>5</sup> It is more like a game or network of relationships, and less like a completed object.

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The ideal of a networked and participatory, localized media culture has been historically fundamental to the independent media movement in the United States. Its most successful and longstanding practitioners are deeply connected to the places—cities, towns, neighborhoods—that they work in and call home. In the best work to come out of communities, the particular magic of their place infuses the documentaries that are made there.

Yet, media arts and community media organizations are in an increasingly vulnerable place now, as they find—with virtually no public funds and little interested understanding from the philanthropic community—that they must redefine their relationship to the makers and the communities they serve and collaborate with, or perish. The scope of those that are succeeding is focused and rooted in a local culture.

In Philadelphia, the Scribe Video Center, through the tireless work of filmmaker/founder Louis Massiah, has evolved into a necessary and beloved local institution, and one that has been singularly created out of the local media ecology of that city.<sup>6</sup> Besides training people in film and video craft, Scribe’s mission is to work with nonprofits, community groups, and grassroots organizers who want to use film for social and cultural purposes, and to communicate with their constituencies. By creating collaborative and highly democratic media projects, and teaching interested individuals how to create video works themselves, Scribe has pioneered a model for democratic media practice to flourish into the twenty-first century.

When he spoke on our panel, “The Invisible Network,” at the 2007 National Conference on Media Reform (NCMR) in Memphis, Tennessee, Massiah asked, “What happens when communities begin to define themselves by creating media works that reveal the important things that they want the world to know about them?”<sup>7</sup> Scribe’s most recent community media project, its Precious Places Community History Project, explores that question in ways that are deliberate and highly innovative, yet created out of the unique media ecology of Philadelphia. Brought together by Scribe and its network of nonprofit organizations and churches, people of all ages (from teens to grandmothers) in city neighborhoods come together to work with locally based filmmakers to research, film, and edit short video works that define their communities—places where people have lived for generations. Scholars train people in oral history and archival research techniques. Filmmakers facilitate processes where groups of individuals

come to a shared narrative piece together and produce it themselves. Neighborhood screenings stimulate dialogue among people and open up memories and ideas for new work among the participants, coming to a deeper understanding of and relationship with where they live and, because of the throw-away nature of our society, how important it is to capture stories of place before they simply disappear into the next real estate development deal. And they do it with the most ephemeral yet powerful tool for creating a living and breathing record of a moment in time—a story, made and shown in video, on a screen.

Among the forty-two works that have been produced by Precious Places, Massiah showed an evocative and reflective example during the panel at the NCMR conference. The “Still Standing” project in Camden, New Jersey, created *Unhushed*, a video ceremony/performance piece about the Cooper Family estate in the town and the family’s ownership of slaves in the early 1800s. The Camden County Historical Society had repeatedly denied that this plantation had slaves, but researchers and artists dug up documents that proved the existence of several slaves living in the Cooper attic. The video work, created by Camden residents, visualized a naming ceremony for the forgotten slaves and exhumed a shameful secret that town historians also wished would be suppressed.

Philadelphia is a special case in the media ecology of the U.S. It never had public access cable stations, and advocates are now fighting for a citywide wireless network. But it has several university media programs, solid public television, and a local funding community that will consider independent media as a worthy investment. For Massiah, independent media in his city is also a cultural tool layered with history: of early twentieth-century cinema experiments that took place there, of polarized citywide politics, of Quaker history, of nine generations of African American communities that have made the city their ancestral place. In his vision of independent media, it is not defined by broadcast or the Internet, but by a community group working for ten months on a 10-minute video work that is seen and discussed at community centers, barbershops, beauty parlors, and churches.

As a counterweight and response to the increasing ephemerality of digital media culture, where “motion media” lives as an easily gotten record of the moment and simply disappears or is deleted, Scribe’s Precious Places media project is all the more meaningful. It resists the forgetfulness and ahistorical nature of the media stream we are plunged into. The work comes from the inside—people who are not professionals but reside in the place and can reveal its secrets, problems, and triumphs in ways outside historians might never know about or consider. As a kind of advocacy project, Scribe has developed a cultural production model where everyone involved on the creative team is “generating content” from a point of view that only comes when something—like your home place—is at stake and there is deep emotional connection to holding up the mirror.

This slow and methodical, local, and democratic creative investigation may hold one key to rooting the new digital technologies in a sense of historically continuous values and ethics that bind ordinary citizens and develop healthy communities together—not as consumers, but as stewards of public memory. Coupling cultural media production with the urgency of recording memories, storytelling, and the people’s history from the inside is an unappreciated force, supple enough to avoid cultural

obliteration, especially for our communities that are at risk for violence, poverty, and social isolation from the mainstream.

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Easily captured, easily consumed, easily erased: is this the emerging signature of twenty-first-century digital media—a pixelated surface that follows us everywhere and means little to anyone except to repeatedly record, process, and delete the flow of life? Or—shifting approach—do the new tools and interfaces allow us ways to reconsider participatory networks and the role of the artist/author in an emerging era of “user-generated content”? How can collaborators work together more meaningfully by synthesizing the plethora of Internet tools with on-the-ground production (and by extension, education, and organizing) practices that have evolved historically in the media arts community, the public media sphere, and the media activist world?

I suggest that the artist will be valued more for an ability to create (and encourage) multiple versions of work that is built out of networks, communities, clusters, and teams that are constantly changing how the work will be made, received, and reinvented. I suspect, from my own experience, that the individual creator/team (or independent filmmaker) is no match for the emerging technological landscape in its rapidly evolving complexities. The myth of the individual, risk-taking indie filmmaker was a conception of the American baby boom generation reacting to stultifying industrial Hollywood product. It is no longer relevant as an organizing principle for the reinvention of American cinema practice. What is relevant is how to struggle for a public media sphere where communities of makers can come together and form fluid clusters to sustain themselves economically, spiritually, and psychologically in an era when their work may not be financially valued enough to earn a living as professional “content creators” or receive any kind of decent monetary return on their creative investment. Yet, the kinds of media programs and projects that people who work in the media arts and community media fields are doing are essential for maintaining a healthy democracy, both political and cultural.

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At its premiere screening at the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2006, several of the young women involved in the *Gender Chip Project* were in the audience. During the question and answer period, when asked how the project had impacted their lives now, several told the crowd that participating in this film project and being part of this community (which was linked by campus events, early email listservs, parties, luncheons, and field trips, and maybe not of least importance, a name and an identity—the Gender Chip Project) was a defining feature for retaining them in their STEM majors when they were doubting their self-confidence the most. And now, six years after undergraduate graduation, one of the students profiled is an MD, two are STEM PhDs, one is a practicing civil engineer, and one left engineering to be an arts educator and is married with a young child.

While making the film I often worried about the fact that there was no huge “drama” or stimulating confrontations that can easily vivify

a nonfiction film. We did not expose any scandal about the university. There were no personal secrets revealed. There were few individual risks taken that would interest an audience. But now, looking back, the dim awareness of a new generation has clarified: the group of young women in the Gender Chip Project are in the first cohort of the generation being called “millennials”: practical and open-minded organization builders, willing to work in the system and change it from within, and not allow the existing work environment to dictate their life choices. At the time when we were working together, I used to say, “Your destiny is to change the policies that make the system the way it is still. Women before you took their first steps to create change, and made improvements for your generation. And now it’s your turn. How will you do it?” They seemed to take the challenge in stride. And given their astonishingly early sense of confidence and accomplishments, I believe that this generation of young women will change the world, again, and in a way that will make life better for more people than ever before. And it won’t look like the feminism we have grown accustomed to by now.

As I look back, and forward, I see that my latest project opened up new ways of thinking about the role an individual film can play in the larger social ecology it addresses. We are, as Ellen Schneider of Active Voice points out, no longer independent mediamakers, but interdependent ones. That is, we are now free (no “need” for expensive tools, distributors, broadcasters, etc., to release the work to audiences) to exchange and share ideas with our “users” and thus open up a myriad of ways to approach, use, and even change the media piece and redefine its place in our communal cultural habitat. The work we create as individuals, or in clusters, will simply become part of the larger flow of cultural images, ideas, and evolving patterns of dialogue. In this emerging era of open-source media, with its constant surge of new tools and delivery mechanisms, the biggest task facing us is how to understand our individual contributions and redefine their deep human value not only as entertainment or advocacy, but as a way to stimulate dialogue with oneself, the community, and throughout the global media space none of us can escape.

**HELEN DE MICHIEL** is a Bay Area filmmaker, writer, and co-director of the *National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture*.

NOTES 1. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006). 2. Lawrence Wilkinson, “Revisiting the Future,” presentation at Ninth Street Independent Film Center, San Francisco, July 21, 2006. 3. Andrew Blau, *Deep Focus: A Report on the Future of Independent Media* (San Francisco: National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, 2005). 4. See [www.activevoice.net](http://www.activevoice.net) and *The Beyond The Choir Project*. 5. See Jay Rosen’s blog, *The People Formerly Known As The Audiences*, at [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frm.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frm.html). 6. See [www.scribe.org](http://www.scribe.org). 7. See [www2.freepress.net/nem07/=audio07](http://www2.freepress.net/nem07/=audio07).