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| ***JUMP CUT*A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA** |

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Jump Cut*, No. 53, summer 2011

Digital distribution, participatory culture, and the transmedia documentary

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In December 2003, Robert Greenwald released *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War*, to enthusiastic audiences at over 2,600 house parties across the United States. The movie, which depicted a number of prominent intelligence experts taking apart the Bush administration’s case for war Iraq, reached audiences only a few months after production began and offered what was, at the time, one of the more trenchant critiques of the faulty evidence used to justify the war. Greenwald was able to distribute the film so quickly, in part, because he was able to take advantage of existing social networks created by progressive grassroots organizations such as MoveOn.org and AlterNet and think tanks such as The Center for American Progress in order to organize “house parties” where audiences could gather to watch the film with others who were invested in critical discussion of the war (Haynes and Littler 2007). The online distribution also helped to facilitate conversation about the film, and the house parties themselves were often depicted in terms of their ability to create alternative spaces (Goldberg 2003), in which participants could discuss the issues raised by the documentary.

The success of *Uncovered* allowed Greenwald’s Brave New Films to expand the house-party model, distributing several other films, including *Outfoxed* and *Iraq For Sale*, using that approach while also establishing a website that has become an important resource for posting short video clips that typically serve as a form of video-enabled media criticism where amateur and professional video makers can post short videos that comment on mass media political coverage. In this sense, Greenwald helped to give form to what I am calling the *transmedia documentary*, a set of nonfiction films that use the participatory culture of the web to enhance the possibilities for both a vibrant public sphere cultivated around important political issues and an activist culture invested in social and political change. In addition, these films make use of alternative distribution models enabled by digital media, whether streaming video, digital downloads, or social media tools that facilitate public or semi-public screenings. This use of social media tools fits neatly into arguments about the web as a site for returning political power to citizens, and Greenwald’s film helps to illustrate how the transmedia documentary can be used to assemble and engage a mass audience, while also providing an important starting point for thinking about how discussions of new media have come to shape the cultures around documentary film.

This concept of transmedia documentary builds upon and partially reworks the nonfictional modes of representation that Bill Nichols (1991: p. 3) has associated with “the discourses of sobriety,” which operate under the assumption that non-fiction films

“can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences.”

In other words, these films seek to address audiences largely with the goal of producing social or political change, whether that entails ending the war in Iraq, reforming the education system, or promoting climate change activism. These communication practices take place within a network consisting of blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, and other social media tools where anyone with internet access can potentially contribute to discussions of important political and social issues. This network of bloggers, filmmakers, and activists gained new levels of visibility in the wake of the September 11 attacks and the polarized political discourse that emerged in the early preparation for the war in Iraq. As a result, the transmedia documentary became an important site for engaging with the politics of images and for cultivating an engaged, energetic public that could begin to see itself as active participants in a larger political dialogue. To be sure, this focus draws from a long history of debates about active and passive audiences and borrows from past efforts by political filmmakers to produce movies that encourage audiences to move from being consumers to being producers.

Because of this focus on active audiences, the concept of transmedia documentary also builds from arguments developed by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* on the new storytelling models used by film and television producers to create a more immersive and engaging experience for active audiences. Thus, a film like *The Matrix* might be expanded and developed not only through the multiple sequels but also through video games, websites, and even through the straight to DVD animated feature, *The Animatrix*. Jenkins’ arguments have encapsulated some of the technological and social changes that have been reflected in the actual practice of documentary filmmakers, as well as others involved in the documentary industry, including film festival directors and programmers and film journalists. Further, Jenkins shows how audiences themselves become producers, writing fan fiction or producing fans films, and in the best cases, using popular culture texts to engage in political dialogue. As Angelica Das (2011), writing for the Tribeca Film Festival’s “Future of Film” blog argues, “filmmakers from all genres no longer just make films.” Instead, for emerging filmmakers,

“Social documentary projects are increasingly more than social and more than documentary.”

In explaining the value of Jenkins’ concepts for documentary filmmakers, Das argues that transmedia storytelling becomes a way of creating a sense of audience engagement with a documentary project, often months or years before that final documentary project is completed, while also potentially extending the life of a documentary project well after its initially appearance in festivals, theaters, or online.

Das is also attentive to the ways in which social media can be deployed to create a sense of community of engagement around a social or political issue that will persist, even after the documentary has left theaters. In response to Das, Edward J. Delaney (2011) adds that transmedia techniques can assist the goals of social documentaries, especially when filmmakers make use of interactive elements to engage with users through discussion forums or when they use interactive aspects to draw from the talents of their audience, whether to make the documentary or to extend its reach, a process known as crowdsourcing.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](http://www.ejumpcut.org/trialsite/TryonWebDoc/text.html#1n)] In both cases, transmedia is identified not only with storytelling across multiple platforms but also with the using transmedia models to imagine new modes of engagement, to get audiences actively involved in co-producing the film.

Although these new forms of participatory culture are often treated as revolutionary, they are grounded in a much longer history of activist media. In fact, as Michael Renov (2004: p. 10) points out, media activists in the 1960s, such as Newsreel, sought to solicit involvement from their viewers, creating texts that “were active and intended as participatory,” leading to wholesale re-evaluations of normal film and television techniques in order to equip viewers with the means of engaging in their own media criticism. Newsreel also took advantage of alternative distribution techniques, placing advertisements in alternative weeklies and holding screenings that served as fundraisers for organizations such as New York-based community radio station, WBAI. As Renov (2004: p. 15) notes, these alternative distribution techniques “helped reinforce a sense of shared cultural identity,” especially given the sharply divided politics of the 1960s. In this sense, there are significant continuities with older forms, given that transmedia documentaries, such as *Uncovered*, call for users to become participants, whether by hosting or attending a house party or by signing a petition. At the same time, the house parties helped to produce a sense of solidarity among the war’s critics, as viewers used social media to find others who shared their political views.

These celebratory accounts of transmedia documentary are also caught up in what Vincent Mosco (2004: p. 1) refers to as the “myth” that new media technologies can “bring about revolutionary changes in society.” As Mosco notes, the web has been celebrated because of the promise that it will democratize media, allowing anyone to become a publisher or to gain access to alternative viewpoints. Mosco is careful to point out that such myths are not necessarily false; instead they inform our perception of new technologies, shaping how they are used and discussed. Although Mosco (2004: p. 19) is quick to point out that discussions of the web obscure the extent to which media consolidation is taking place, he also notes that enthusiasm for social media and other forms of digital media can also reveal “a genuine desire for community and democracy.” Thus, rather than arguing that the transmedia documentary offers something genuinely new, this essay attempts to make sense of the ways in which the alliance between non-fiction film and social media reflects these larger cultural desires.

Documentary filmmakers have often used alternative modes of distribution, and documentaries have often been connected to a larger tradition of social and political activism. In fact, Jane Gaines (2007: p. 40) has noted that contemporary anti-war documentaries involved in “the production of outrage,” including the films of Robert Greenwald and David Zeiger’s *Sir! No Sir!*, extend and rework “the documentary social change legacy” of Vietnam-era anti-war films, in some cases by directly depicting earlier, historical forms of mass protest. Zeiger’s *Sir! No Sir!*, for example, uses depictions of the anti-war movement within the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to celebrate past forms of resistance while simultaneously updating those practices for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Zeiger has done this by producing a web series in collaboration with Iraq Veterans Against the War, *This is Where We Take Our Stand* ([http://thisiswherewetakeourstand.com/](http://thisiswherewetakeourstand.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), which profiles a groups of Iraq War veterans who have spoken out against the war, a series that continued several years after the film was initially released. Despite these forms of documentary activism, it is less than clear what happens once these films engage viewers. In fact, a number of critics, including Micah White (2010), have argued that online petitions, what he calls “clicktivism,” have short-circuited more demanding forms of political activity, breeding passivity rather than producing active political participants. Although the transmedia documentary opens itself up to this risk, projects such as Zeiger’s and Greenwald’s help illustrate the potential for filmmakers to direct attention to a specific issue.

Thus, although many of the techniques of the transmedia seem new, they are often drawing from and building upon older forms of documentary activism, even while they are being adapted into new media forms. As a result, this combination of participatory culture and activist documentary offers an interesting site for thinking about how nonfiction filmmakers are finding new ways of understanding and engaging with documentary spectator, often in collaboration with institutions and organizations that use social media tools to reach those audiences in new and creative ways. In order to understand how documentaries can participate in promoting social activism, we must look at the new distribution, exhibition, and promotion models that use elements of participatory culture to tap into desires for social change. In fact, these distribution and exhibition strategies, connected as they are to a logic of social media, become a form of authorship, shaping not only the reception of these documentaries but also how they fit into a larger media and political culture, with media industry leaders, such as Rick Allen of Snag Films and Jeff Skoll of Participant Productions, in some sense, shaping the delivery, exhibition, and even reception of documentaries.

These forms of transmedia documentary, along with the new distribution platforms that have reshaped documentary distribution, have contributed to the emergence of a transmedia documentary culture built around a desire for audiences to view themselves as active participants, rather than passive consumers of political texts. In this context, I identify three significant distribution practices that have shaped post-9/11 documentary culture.

First, I discuss the “house party” model developed by Robert Greenwald. This approach to distribution, which has evolved alongside emerging digital technologies, has defined itself both in terms of circumventing the traditional gatekeepers of theatrical and television distribution and in terms of encouraging active, critical engagement with broadcast media through its use of various pedagogies of media criticism and analysis.

I then discuss Jeff Skoll’s Participant Productions, which produces both narrative features and documentaries about timely political topics, such as global warming (*An Inconvenient Truth*), food production (*Food Inc*), and disability issues (*Murderball*). Although Participant generally sponsors films designed for a limited theatrical release, mostly to art house theaters, their movies are also supplemented by websites that encourage audiences to become involved in social issues, such as ClimateCrisis.net, which sought to shape the audience response to *An Inconvenient Truth*. Alongside of Participant Productions, I look at Ted Leonsis’ and Rick Allen’s SnagFilms, an online distribution network that screens documentaries for free online with brief advertisements, while allowing users to “snag” those films and post them on their own websites by cutting and pasting a simple piece of code. As a result, audiences become “programmers,” capable of creating their own virtual theaters where they can curate a set of films that are important to them.

Then, I look at Franny Armstrong’s *The Age of Stupid* (2009), a documentary that sought to encourage activism around the issue of climate change. The documentary itself uses the fictional trope of a futuristic archivist (played by British actor Pete Postlethwaite) looking back at how apathy over climate change led to a planet that will become virtually uninhabitable. However, the biggest strength of Armstrong’s film is her use of social media to fund, promote, and even exhibit the film through techniques such as crowdsourcing, in which a filmmaker uses the web to raise funds from a larger audience. Although these approaches entail only a limited part of a larger set of practices within a networked documentary culture, they also represent important attempts to theorize how social media tools can be used to place documentary films within a larger political community.

Finally, I examine two prominent conservative transmedia documentaries, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, which advocates for intelligent design, and *I Want Your Money*, which calls for less government spending, in order to illustrate that many of the principles that helped sustain progressive documentary circulation, exhibition, and reception have now been adapted by fiscal and religious conservatives, many of whom experienced their own sense of cultural or political alienation with the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency in 2008. Thus, although transmedia documentaries have been understood as an alternative to broadcast news, they provide platforms for a wide range of political viewpoints, all of which may be defining themselves in opposition to the national news media, as Sarah Palin’s consistent denigration of the “lamestream media” (even while taking a paycheck from Fox News) amply illustrates. However, given the political implications of documentary, it is worth considering how transmedia storytelling is being used to imagine new forms of participation.

Brave New Films

Perhaps the most frequently discussed socially networked documentary practice is the house party model devised by Robert Greenwald and his colleagues at Brave New Films. While *Uncovered* is significant for launching the socially-networked house party model, Greenwald has since released half a dozen other films, many of them critical of various Bush administration policies in Iraq, but all of them attentive to questions regarding the role of corporate and governmental institutions in shaping public culture. In addition to introducing well-researched films that engage with important social issues, Brave New Films’ role in reshaping distribution has been crucial in establishing the possibilities for transmedia documentary. As Greenwald himself observes,

“what we’ve learned about distribution may be more important in the long run than the films themselves” (quoted in Aufderheide 2005).

Further, in his most recent work, Greenwald has even reversed or reworked normal promotional practices by making the content of his 2009 project, *Rethink Afghanistan*, available online in short ten-minute videos before making the film available as a complete feature-length movie, allowing Brave New Films to continue to make timely interventions into public discussions of U.S. foreign policy. In fact, Greenwald has moved away from producing feature-length documentaries altogether, instead opting for short-form interventions using online media, suggesting that he has chosen to privilege timeliness and immediacy over the event status typically associated with the house parties.[2]

Like many of the activist documentaries and videos produced by Paper Tiger TV, the Gulf Crisis TV Project, and Top Value Television, Greenwald’s films are typically structured around what could be called “pedagogies of media criticism,” in that they seek to prepare viewers themselves to become media critics. *Uncovered*, for example, focuses on the use of faulty evidence to justify an U.S. attack on Iraq. Throughout the film, former diplomats and intelligence experts raise questions about key pieces of evidence, most notably Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech before the United Nations and the use of forged documents to depict the sale of uranium. Alongside these critiques, Greenwald depicts the use of provocative and threatening language including repeated phrases in State of the Union speeches and on Sunday-morning talk shows (“weapons of mass destruction,” “the smoking gun in the form of a mushroom cloud”) to indicate that Bush officials carefully choreographed the build up to war, even scripting the very phrases that might incite fear in a nation still traumatized by the September 11 attacks. Greenwald’s films then seek to illustrate how these talk shows play a hidden, but crucial, role in shaping political discourse that, in turn, shapes policy.

Although these moves may conform to a relatively standard form of journalism, the film itself was less crucial than the attempts to create a public event, one in which audiences could discuss and, presumably, blog or write about the film in order to turn it into a newsworthy event. These house parties, as I have argued, helped to show that social networks could be used to assemble groups of people based upon shared political affiliations.

Similarly, his subsequent film, *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* also seeks to depict some of the harmful editorial practices associated with Fox News. A number of sequences depict how Fox News anchors were given instructions to repeat specific “talking points” that would either praise the policies of President George W. Bush or denigrate liberal and progressive causes. In addition, the film uses Rupert Murdoch’s media empire to introduce some of the genuine problems associated with media consolidation, making the film an important intervention in the political activism around that issue. Like Greenwald’s other films, *Outfoxed* is rooted in a longer history of media activism, echoing strategies used by Dee Dee Halleck in the 1980s with Deep Dish and Paper Tiger TV.[3] In this sense, Greenwald’s films are, as Charles Musser (2007: 12) characterizes them, “struggles over representations,” in which the commercial news media is seen as complicit with official discourses. In contrast, Greenwald and other media critics are positioned as experts who can challenge the dominant representations of politics, even while preparing viewers to cultivate those skills and to produce their own media criticism.

One of the more powerful and influential practices modeled in *Outfoxed* consisted of the film’s “close reading” of a number of representative case studies in which Fox News supported conservative positions, even while claiming to be “fair and balanced.” In fact, by taking these scenes out of sequence and juxtaposing repeated language, *Outfoxed* seems to offer an implicit critique of the news channel’s use of the discourses of liveness and immediacy for emotional affect. Similarly, discussions of the graphics of the Fox News Alert engage with what John T. Caldwell (1995) refers to as the “pictorialism” of contemporary television. One of the more powerful sequences was a segment profiling Jeremy Glick, the working-class son of one of the people who died in the World Trade Center, and who was interviewed and subsequently attacked by news commentator Bill O’Reilly. Glick’s interview functions primarily to illustrate how Fox News shuts down opposing — liberal or progressive — viewpoints, painting them as either unpatriotic or “radical.”

Although *Outfoxed* offers a number of anecdotal examples of conservative bias, its larger purpose is to foster a more general culture of media criticism. Within the film, this goal is articulated through the film’s concluding utopian impulse, in which Greenwald highlights a small number of success stories of locally owned media start-ups that were able to compete with corporate-backed rivals, as well as a number of community groups, which focused on preparing teenagers and young adults to produce their own media. Further, the house party for *Outfoxed* also served as the launch for the liberal media watchdog site, Media Matters, with the site’s founder, Chris Brock, inviting viewers of the film to become contributors themselves. Like the film, Media Matters models the kinds of media criticism that Greenwald deems to be important to a vibrant public sphere.

All of the films produced by Greenwald direct viewers to the Brave New Films website, and given the need for timely interventions in political discourse, the website has moved toward the production of quickly-produced, concise videos that seek to make a point about an issue currently in the news, with videos appearing mere hours after the story develops. During the 2008 election, for example, the website posted a series of “Fox Attacks” videos, in which they edited together a series short sound bites from Fox News to show how the channel was repeating false or misleading allegations against Democratic presidential candidates and policies, including “Fox Attacks…Black People,” which showed how Fox used racially-charged language in order to depict then-candidate Barack Obama as a mysterious outsider.

Subsequently Greenwald has reworked many of his earlier film distribution and exhibition practices for *Rethink Afghanistan*, which he assembled gradually during the summer of 2009. As the film’s title suggests, the documentary asks us to reconsider the mainstream depiction of Afghanistan and the foreign policy logic that emphasizes a military solution in that country. However, what makes *Rethink Afghanistan* unusual is the decision to release the film in short ten-minute segments focused on a specific area of concern in Afghanistan, in much the same way that DVD chapters or a series of webisodes might be used to present short, accessible chunks of information for interested audiences. This approach prompted Greenwald to characterize the film as his first “real-time documentary” (Stelter 2009). Early segments focused on the treatment of women and on the tenuous situation in Pakistan, and this online rolling release strategy helps to produce an ongoing engagement with our policy in Afghanistan, rather than a single punctual dialogue focused around the entire film. Such an approach can, potentially, lead to a more detailed engagement and would potentially allow the film to remain in the public eye longer. It also allows the film to be viewed not as a final product but as a mutable object, capable of being changed as the situation in Afghanistan changes or as new information becomes available.

Thus, Brave New Films illustrates two significant components of the transmedia documentary. First, it makes extensive use of the idea that documentaries and other films can be endlessly revised, altered, and supplemented as new information becomes available. In fact, Greenwald altered the original DVD version of *Uncovered* when it was briefly released to theaters in 2004. Ongoing examples of bias at Fox News supplement *Outfoxed* years after the film originally appeared on DVD. Rather than a single narrative, transmedia documentaries allow filmmakers to react and respond to social and political events as they change over time. Second, Greenwald helped to establish a popular concept of audience participation. Whether that entails hosting a house party or simply agreeing to attend, audiences could express public support for a political cause by using social media.

More crucially, Greenwald’s films also served a wider pedagogical role, modeling forms of media criticism that audiences could then emulate in their daily lives. In this sense, Greenwald’s films, in their best moments, serve to reproduce a skeptical attitude toward the commercial media and toward political speech in general, equipping viewers with critical thinking skills that they could use to read future news broadcasts.

Participant Productions and SnagFilms

While Brave New Films deploys the tools of social networks in order to virally promote their films and to transform viewers into media activists, a number of new media entrepreneurs have sought to leverage low-budget distribution tools for the purpose of building an infrastructure of for-profit documentary distribution and social activism. The two most prominent organizations to use these tools are Participant Productions and SnagFilms. Jeff Skoll’s Participant Productions uses a more traditional theatrical and DVD distribution process, combining that with an active web presence where the social and political aims of their films can be extended. Skoll’s status as an “author” of the Participant model is established in a number of news articles, including a profile in *Fast Company* (Kamenetz 2009), in which the former eBay executive explains his desire to use commercially viable films to have a social impact. He says he’s been informed by the “social-entrepreneurship movement,” in which business practices are used to “solve” social problems, making the movement a hybrid of commercial and social interests. This entrepreneurial approach may obscure the degree to which many social issues cannot be resolved — and may in fact be exacerbated — by this approach, especially if the social issues involved are not seen as financially profitable.

Skoll’s company has made a number of films, most of them documentaries, focusing on issues such as disability (*Murderball*), genocide (*Darfur Now*), and freedom of expression (*Chicago 10*). After choosing scripts that combine a degree of commercial and social potential, Participant then seeks to work with various non-profit organizations to expand the film’s outreach. In this regard, Participant inherits from and reworks what Jonathan Kahana (2008: 26) describes as “the Griersonian tradition of humanist advocacy,” operating under the belief that if these films can effectively frame a social or political problem, viewers watching the film will be moved to act. In the case of Participant Films, they are encouraged to do so through the vibrant websites associated with each of the company’s films.

This approach of mixing advocacy and entertainment has been most explicitly modeled in Participant’s involvement with *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which Al Gore’s status as a public intellectual is used to reflect upon the global warming crisis and the need for citizen to demand a change in corporate and governmental environmental policies and practices. Although the film is most widely discussed in terms of the dramatic visuals used in Gore’s slideshow, the biographical commentary that frames the film also serves as an attempt to theorize its reception and the potential for a global environmental movement. In fact, by positioning Gore as a failed politician (he comments at one point to a chuckling audience that he “used to be the next President of the United States”), *An Inconvenient Truth* essentially makes the case that the active viewing public watching a documentary can accomplish what the political process did not. What’s needed is a grassroots movement around climate change, one that is shaped by Gore but that requires the intervention of individuals making the daily choices to live their lives in an environmentally-beneficial way.

Davis Guggenheim’s documentary is structured around a presentation, in which Gore uses a series of visual images — shocking footage of melting glaciers, charts and graphs depicting dramatic temperature increases — to make a case, based primarily in the authority of scientific evidence, that global warming is happening and that human activity is a significant factor. The film served not only to rally support for climate change activism, but it also worked to transform the politician’s image from a stiff, humorless policy wonk into a knowledgeable, passionate activist on behalf of both climate change and social media tools. The film uses Gore’s personal story to redefine him as someone who is deeply invested in both scientific inquiry and in the activity of teaching. The film also conveys Gore’s ambivalence about the potential of working within the political system, where he had served as a member of Congress and, later, as Vice President, and had come to the conclusion that the structural problems of party politics worked against meaningful, rational discourse (Gore 2007). Thus, the film combines a pedagogical impulse with a desire to realize social change through the public sphere, where through the power of documentary, Gore’s message might truly be “heard” for the first time. Thus Gore comments at one point,

“I’ve been trying to tell this story for a long time and I feel as if I’ve failed to get this message across.”

Thus, while Kahana (2008: p. 28) is correct to argue that Gore’s success in delivering his message depends, in part, on the documentary “restaging” of Gore’s lecture, it also relies upon a documentary public that can act upon his prescriptions.

Although the film received quite a bit of attention, grossing over $24 million domestically and $49 million worldwide, making it the third highest earning political documentary of all-time, as of June 2011, the film is inseparable from the framing materials that shaped — and extended — its reception, building through social media tools an activist culture around climate change. In fact, as Patricia Aufderheide (2006: 50) observes in her review, the film leaves us with the conclusion that combating climate change has become “our problem” and that

“it is something that we can take action on right now, and something that will in fact depend on myriad individual choices.”

During the closing credits, the film directs audiences to the website ([http://www.climatecrisis.net](http://www.climatecrisis.net" \t "_blank)), where viewers of the film ostensibly can become more involved in reducing global warming, a strategy typical of participant films. A link in the sidebar invites viewers to “take action,” where they can learn about the effects of their personal environmental practices, join a “virtual march” against global warming, or find other resources in campaigning for renewable energy. At least 2.7 million people have gone to the general company’s central activism site, takepart.com, over 400,000 of them to determine their carbon footprint, as of May 2008 (Keegan 2008). However, such changes are often difficult to quantify, given that many people who attend screenings of *An Inconvenient Truth* or Robert Kenner’s *Food Inc*, or go to takepart.com, may already be predisposed to support the causes depicted in the film.

This focus should not suggest that Participant Productions necessarily espouses a specific political position or approach. Although many of Participant’s films can be aligned with progressive or liberal political positions, one of their most high-profile documentaries was Guggenheim’s *Waiting for “Superman”* (2010), a documentary that traced argues that the education system is in decline. The film drew from unorthodox education leaders, including Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public school system and Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone. Guggenheim, who professes to be politically liberal, used the documentary to argue for nominally conservative positions on education, including vouchers and charter schools, while also criticizing teachers’ unions under the guise that they stifle innovation and change.[4]

Like most Participant Films, *Waiting for “Superman”* includes a political campaign. In this case, the website includes a standard email that users can send to their elected representatives, asking them to ban limits on the number of charter schools and to expand school choice programs. Other links on the site take viewers to Facebook pages where they can support “causes” such as Stand for Children Leadership Center’s “Support Our Teachers,” which solicits support by promising that $1 will be donated for everyone who watches a video introducing users to the cause.[5] In most cases, however, the forms of activism imagined by the film’s producers tend to be constrained by the possibilities offered by the available social media tools. Thus, in some sense, Participant’s practices expose some of the limits of the consumer-oriented activist documentary, showing that transmedia documentaries need not be tied to a specific political orientation. More crucially, the models for activism may be limited to online forms of activity, such as signing and forwarding petitions, a kind of “one-click” form of activism (what White refers to as “clicktivism”), rather than encouraging fuller forms of engagement.

SnagFilms, by comparison, is an online distribution hub that positions the documentary audience as potential programmers of documentary films in “virtual theaters,” streaming video widgets embedded by the user on a blog or website. While the founder of SnagFilms, Ted Leonsis, has produced a number of provocative documentaries, including *Nanking* and *Kicking It*, SnagFilms’ most explicit contribution is its attempt to imagine new documentary distribution models by inviting bloggers and others to “donate their pixels” by placing a widget on their website where people can stream one of the films in Snag’s library, which as of June 2011, consisted of well over 2,000 documentaries. By asking potential audiences to use the widget to post Snag’s films on their blogs, SnagFilms is allowing their films to circulate freely among documentary audiences, turning documentary movies into what Leonsis refers to as “user-distributed content” (Mehta 2009) and turning users into viral marketers promoting films and causes they support. Once again, this requires little commitment on the part of the user, who can simply copy and paste the code into a blog post.

In order to make their documentaries available for free online, SnagFilms relies upon an advertising-supported model in which the documentaries are briefly interrupted by short 15-20 second ads, usually about five times per film, rather than paying documentary filmmakers an upfront fee for distributing their movies.[6] While this practice can produce forms of cognitive dissonance — as when Morgan Spurlock’s humorous health-conscious documentary, *Super Size Me* is sponsored by a fast food restaurant or when Phillippe Diaz’s *The End of Poverty?* is sponsored by a bank — the advertisements themselves are somewhat less intrusive than on TV. In addition, Snag works with filmmakers to arrange that some of the revenue earned from the films be donated to an organization appropriate to that film. More recently, Snag has arranged with Hulu, YouTube, and the Internet Movie Database, as well as a couple of video-on-demand services, for their films to stream at those sites, expanding their reach even further.

But the most significant component of SnagFilms is its goal of using documentaries to promote discussion among socially networked audiences. Although the ability to embed a documentary on a blog or personal website might seem to be a trivial feature or gimmick, it can also allow bloggers to become participants, able to contextualize the documentaries historically and politically. For example, in his blog entry on Rob Epstein’s *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Andrew Sullivan (2009) begins by criticizing Gus Van Sant’s 2008 biopic, *Milk* for its artificial depiction of the 1970s era Castro District where Harvey Milk rose to prominence, and its apparent lack of interest in Milk’s political activism. Sullivan not only recommends the documentary as a superior historical narrative but also criticizes a dramatic film that focuses on psychological realism and emotional affect rather than political change. Although there is no necessary reason to assume that the documentary (the original) is better than the narrative feature (the follow-up), Sullivan is able to engage with audiences who “visit” his virtual theater about the political relevance of a documentary made over twenty years earlier, while also allowing him to build a community of interest around the film.

A similar example emerged when a number of film bloggers embedded the video of *High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell* soon after the release of the David O. Russell biopic, *The Fighter*, starring Mark Wahlberg as the boxer Micky Ward. Russell’s film famously cited *High on Crack Street* because one of its subjects, Dicky Eklund, was Ward’s older brother, who had also been a successful boxer before developing a crack addiction. On the one hand, such a video can affirm the realism of Russell’s film, but on the other, it also encourages other discussions about the role of documentary in shaping perceptions of the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, where the documentary was filmed, while also raising questions about the exploitative aspects of *High on Crack Street*’s depictions of drug use.

By promoting political documentaries such as *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Sullivan and other bloggers like him are participating in public conversation about a range of important political issues. Although Sullivan is somewhat exceptional in that he had a career as a political commentator before turning to blogging, his citation and discussion of Epstein’s film carries well beyond the “associational boundaries” needed for public dialogue, allowing users of the Snag widget to contribute to a networked public sphere. In this case, it is worthwhile to note that the theatrical release of *Milk* — and its heavy promotion as an Oscar contender — also likely shaped the decision to make it available, however temporarily, at SnagFilms. Thus, although Snag links many of its movies to specific political causes, the free widget also encourages other forms of sharing that may go well beyond the intentions of the documentary itself.

*The Age of Stupid*

One of the more innovative uses of transmedia documentary to support political activism is Franny Armstrong’s 2009 environmental documentary, *The Age of Stupid*. The film offers a hybrid documentary approach, with Pete Postlethwaite playing a librarian in the year 2055. He’s identified as the Archivist, who scolds the human race for their inaction in preventing global warming. The Archivist curates a “Global Archive,” a series of short documentaries that depict symptoms of climate change, including the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, a Nigerian woman who fishes in oil-polluted waters, and an octogenarian mountaineer who has witnessed the receding of glaciers where he hikes in the Alps. Armstrong skillfully weaves between these narrative threads to suggest that people were — to use the film’s terminology — *stupid* in allowing climate change to continue. The film is a bracing polemic, one that aggressively asserts the urgency of combating global warming. However, given its strident critique of corporations that engage in harmful environmental practices, it also offered Armstrong a difficult challenge in terms of funding and distributing her film.

As a result, Armstrong drew from audience support, seeking assistance in funding, producing, promoting, and distributing the film. Like many recent filmmakers, Armstrong used Crowdfunding techniques to raise the money to make *The Age of Stupid*. Crowdfunding is a specific form of crowdsourcing in which a producer raises funds, often through online services such as Kickstarter ([http://www.kickstarter.com](http://www.kickstarter.com" \t "_blank)), often accompanied with the promise that the filmmakers will give gifts back to people who make donations, with gift ranging from a poster for the film to a copy of the DVD or even, for major donors, a trip to the movie’s theatrical premiere. In fact, Armstrong, shaped by her experiences with self-distributing her critique of the fast food industry, *McLibel*, chose to crowdfund *Age of Stupid*, in part because it would make it easier for her to retain distribution rights, therefore providing her with more control over when and where the film would be seen, with Armstrong speculating that millions of people saw the film because she retained rights rather than selling them.[7] Thus, even at the pre-production stage, Armstrong was able to engage audiences and get them involved in supporting the film and the cause associated with it.

This sense of participatory production also ensured that the film would receive an additional boost when it came time to promote and distribute the film. Armstrong surmised that the crowds who invested in her film would also likely offer the film free publicity through blog posts, tweets, and other forms of word-of-mouth advertising. These collaborative activities are not completely disconnected from existing institutions. In fact, like Greenwald, Armstrong worked with existing NGOs and other advocacy groups, including MoveOn.org and Greenpeace, in order to leverage their networks to build an audience for the film. Such techniques led filmmaker Jon Reiss (2009), a high-profile advocate of do-it-yourself filmmaking, to characterize *The Age of Stupid* as

“the future of film, film culture and film distribution and marketing.”

Reiss goes on to point out that the film premiered on 550 screens in 45 countries, supported largely by a massive event screening in which the film’s premiere party, featuring performances by musicians including Radiohead’s Thom Yorke, was broadcast live to audiences, creating what Reiss called “a worldwide cinematic event.” The event itself was timed to precede the United Nations Climate Summit in Copenhagen, which began only a few days after the premiere, with the film’s producers actively campaigning to get the U.N. to enact stricter fuel standards. Although it would be difficult to measure the film’s overall impact on climate change activism — the summit in Copenhagen did not lead to any specific policy changes — the “event” status of the premiere helped to ensure more mainstream media coverage than a typical documentary would receive.

However, *The Age of Stupid* is perhaps more significant because of the ways in which it sought to offer a “transparent” model for showing how to crowdfund and for demonstrating its environmentally friendly production techniques. The film’s website ([http://www.spannerfilms.net/crowd\_funding](http://www.spannerfilms.net/crowd_funding%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)) consists of extensive, if humorous, tips for showing others how to crowdfund. These suggestions include the decision to publically release the film’s budget, as well as offering templates for loan agreements and other financial and legal texts, but in all cases, the filmmakers preach the idea of involvement, suggesting that supporters want to be considered “part of the team.” Thus, like other transmedia approaches, *The Age of Stupid* began with the recognition that audience participation could be mobilized, not merely to get people to attend the film but also to promote it and, in turn, to promote the political causes associated with it.

*Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*

Finally, although most of the examples offered here are of films that support progressive political causes, the principles of the transmedia documentary — especially its populist model of participation — are not aligned with a specific point of view. In fact, conservative organizations can and often use alternative distribution techniques, through church groups and think tanks, among other groups, to distribute documentaries. In addition, the populist aspects of participatory culture fit neatly within what Thomas Frank (2004: p. 194) refers to as the “Great Backlash” associated with conservative anti-intellectualism, which encompasses “a powerful suspicion of professional expertise associated with the historical left,” whether the educational system, evolutionary theorists, or government institutions.

The documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, starring actor and former Richard Nixon speechwriter, Ben Stein, deploys many of the techniques typically associated with the transmedia documentary. *Expelled* argues that the scientific establishment, which Stein refers to throughout the film as “Big Science,” has operated to suppress evidence that the universe may have been created through intelligent design. Stein positions himself as a rebellious underdog, challenging the scientific community and defending the academic freedom of scientists who have been denied tenure for espousing intelligent design as an alternative to evolution. The film is at its most vicious during a concluding montage, in which images associated with evolutionary theory are crosscut with depictions of the Holocaust, suggesting visually and implying verbally that “Darwinism” and the Holocaust are related.

Like many transmedia documentaries, the filmmakers behind *Expelled* sought to use a wide range of ancillary media to build a grassroots movement around the issue of intelligent design. In fact, the movie marketing company, Motive Entertainment, which specializes in promoting movies to Christian audiences and also promoted *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, used a wide range of techniques to get audiences to attend the theatrical premiere, refining Greenwald’s house party model by creating a culture of anticipation surrounding the film.

In fact, the company sponsored a contest in which the church or school group that submitted the most ticket stubs would win a $10,000 donation. This contest provided further encouragement for these groups to attend the film early in its theatrical run, allowing the filmmakers to be reasonably assured of a relatively large opening weekend box office, a move that led to a $2.9 million box office on opening weekend, with the film earning over $7 million in theaters, placing it as one of the highest grossing political documentaries in North American history.[8]

Such a technique could also be used rhetorically to suggest that there is a large, but often unmet, audience for films with Christian or conservative themes, further implying that the political views of the film are, in some sense, affirmed by their popularity.[9] It’s worth noting, however, that many of the claims in *Expelled* were challenged by a powerful and web-savvy group of film critics, science professors, and religious skeptics, who posted blog entries and even created websites where scene-by-scene critiques could be published. In fact, this anti-*Expelled* movement, typified by the website Expelled Exposed ([http://www.expelledexposed.com/](http://www.expelledexposed.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), was often far more visible online than proponents of the film.

More recently, Ray Griggs’ 2010 documentary, *I Want Your Money*, helped to give expression to conservative opposition to the economic stimulus package passed by the Obama administration, while arguing that Obama’s goal is to usher in a socialist state. Both the documentary and the film’s trailer mix inexpensive animation, interviews with conservative leaders, and sound bites from the film’s ideological hero, Ronald Reagan (“government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”). In fact, the trailer is structured around an imagined conversation in the Oval Office between an animated Obama and Reagan, in which Obama reports that he has “learned in school that it’s better to redistribute wealth,” with an angered Reagan huffing back, that he “learned in *real life* that it’s not; it’s called theft.” Aside from transparently offering a defense of lower taxes and diminished social programs, the scene helps to reinforce Obama’s image as a detached intellectual, removed from the ostensibly “real life” experiences of the B-movie star, Reagan. Thus, like *Expelled, I Want Your Money* positions Reagan as aligned with an anti-institutional backlash.

However, in addition to this conservative narrative, *I Want Your Money* is significant because of its attempts to depict the Tea Party protests as a response to being excluded from full political participation or, more precisely, to being inaccurately depicted — and therefore silenced — by the mainstream news media. Over images of the protests on the National Mall, Griggs remarks in voice-over that the Tea Party includes “conservatives pushed too hard for too long,” once again reinforcing the idea, suggested in *Expelled*, that conservatives have been excluded from participating in politics. Shots of individual protestors show them holding signs that argue that the Tea Party has been depicted as “angry racists,” while another protestor holds up a sign that says.

“Doesn’t Matter What My Sign Says. The Press Will Call It Racist.”

While the images are meant to challenge the argument that Tea Party protests were a racist response to the election of an African American President, the signs also serve as an expression of the backlash against the news media, which conservatives have depicted as silencing them. These films offer a clear illustration that many of the strengths of the transmedia documentary can be mobilized by any political group, especially those that feel excluded from current political discourse. Like their progressive counterparts, these documentaries succeed in reinforcing a sense of community around shared political views, a practice that is reinforced by the transmedia documentary’s immersion in the tools of social media.

Conclusion

While the transmedia documentary seems to offer a potentially new way for filmmakers and audiences to engage with social and political problems that matter to them, it is important to be attentive to the possible limitations as well. Like all social media tools, transmedia documentaries rely upon widespread and affordable broadband access, which is certainly far from universally available. Further, the existence of blogs and other online forums is no guarantee of productive political discourse and does not ensure that a variety of voices will be heard, as a quick glance at the comments of any YouTube video will quickly make clear. In fact, comments that are controversial often receive more attention, thus obscuring some of the more substantive forms of dialogue that circulate online. Finally, contributing to an online discussion may not satisfy the need for more active participation in a political cause.

And, as Jonathan Kahana has observed (2008: pp. 331-336), in his discussion of Dylan Avery’s *Loose Change*, the ideology of authenticity associated with desktop production and distribution tools can be used to support a profound skepticism toward the networked public sphere, rather than a belief in its ability to affect change. Like a number of transmedia documentaries, Loose Change sought to refute official political discourse, in this case arguing that the attacks of September 11 were either permitted or even orchestrated by members of the U.S. government; however, unlike these other documentaries, Avery’s film alleges a deeply entrenched — albeit mostly discredited — conspiracy theory that seems to render any sort of political change impossible. Instead, helpless viewers are confronted with a massive, if faceless, bureaucracy that inhibits any kind of meaningful response to government policy.

Even with these alternative modes of distribution, the transmedia documentary may struggle to reach even a relatively small audience, especially given the difficulty of making users aware of the wide range of films that are available online. In research conducted by the Center for Social Media, for example, they found that Deborah Scranton’s documentary, *The War Tapes*, earned less than $300,000 at the box office (Aufderheide 2007: 63 and Wittke 2007). However, as the Center for Social Media concludes, these numbers obscure the ways in which Scranton was able to use social media tools to facilitate viral marketing practices that can extend the reach of a documentary film into multiple publics. In the case of *The War Tapes*, Scranton’s carefully calibrated promotions reached a variety of audiences, including documentary enthusiasts, military families, and others curious to know more about the war in Iraq, an approach mirrored in Scranton’s studious attempts to prevent the film — and the publicity materials that framed it — from taking a clear position on the war.

Thus, an unstable and shifting documentary marketplace has forced filmmakers and producers to develop new and creative approaches to engaging with audiences. These practices often involve the creative adaptation of social media tools to encourage the active participation rather than the passive consumption of documentary texts, building upon — and in some cases — helping to define a newly emerging networked public sphere. As a result, the transmedia documentary is actively involved in rethinking how social media technologies can be used for political activism and for fostering vital public conversations about issues that matter.

Notes

1. Perhaps the most influential discussion of crowdsourcing comes from Clay Shirky, who discussed how talented innovators have used social media to tap into the wisdom of crowds. Shirky cites examples ranging from a man finding his iPhone using social media to varied forms of citizen journalism to argue that people are organizing, often for powerful political purposes. See Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

2. See, for example, Larry Daressa, “The Political Film and its Audience in the Digital Age: Newsreel at Forty and Zero,” California Newsreel, 10 May 2008
<[http://newsreel.org/articles/Newsreel40.htm](http://newsreel.org/articles/Newsreel40.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)>.

3. For a discussion of this history see Paper Tiger Television History
([http://papertiger.org/history](http://papertiger.org/history%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)).

4. It’s worth noting that Michelle Rhee was discredited soon after the film was released when it was reveled that some of the improved testing results she cited had in fact been discredited. See Jack Gillum, “When standardized test scores soared in D.C., were the gains real?,” *USA Today*, March 30, 2011
<[http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-28-1Aschooltesting28\_CV\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-28-1Aschooltesting28_CV_N.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)>.

5. See Stand for Children, accessed May 17, 2011.
<[http://apps.facebook.com/causes/petitions/564?m=eb0f8b67](http://apps.facebook.com/causes/petitions/564?m=eb0f8b67" \t "_blank)>

6. Michael Cieply, “A Digital Niche for Indie Film,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2011
<[http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/a-digital-niche-for-indie-film/](http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/a-digital-niche-for-indie-film/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)>.

7. See “Crowdfunding FAQ,” Spanner Films, accessed May 18, 2011
<[http://www.spannerfilms.net/money\_faq](http://www.spannerfilms.net/money_faq%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)>.

8. All box office numbers are taken from Box Office Mojo
<[http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=expelled.htm](http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=expelled.htm" \t "_blank)>.

9. See, for example, the affirmative review of *Expelled* at *Christian Film News*,  [http://christianfilmnews.com/1687/expelled-no-intelligence-allowed-dvd/](http://christianfilmnews.com/1687/expelled-no-intelligence-allowed-dvd/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

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