

Imagining Impact: Documentary Film and the Production of Political Effects

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The structural transformation of long-form documentary in the last decade has reshaped its capacity for political intervention, the types of claims it makes, and the forms through which it makes them. One can see this as part of the broader reconstitution of politics and media that has taken place across a variety of domains, driven in part by developments in digital technologies. I have been interested in this transformation in two ways.

First, as a scholar, I have written about architectures of activism and the processes of mediation through which a subject matter gets turned into an object of politics. Drawing on ethnographic research on the transnational Tibet movement and human rights advocacy, I have analyzed how nonstate and nongovernmental actors stage their claims using an array of representational means and how their rhetorical dimensions condition the forms of publicity mobilized.¹ This work is premised on the idea that claims do not just exist in the world; they have to be relayed, remediated, and reframed in order to be able to circulate, a process that entails social labor.² At the same time, circulation is not neutral, but is grounded in a network of financial, institutional, technological, and discursive infrastructures that have a determining effect on the shape of the objects that travel through their channels.³

Second, as a filmmaker, I have participated in these processes of mediation firsthand. In 2008, I codirected *Lioness* (82 minutes), a feature documentary about American servicewomen who were sent into direct ground combat in Iraq. The experience gave me immediate insight into the role cultural forms can play in constituting things as sites of public debate, struggle, and advocacy. Nonfiction film has been a cinema of social engagement, dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, when it emerged as a distinct form through the works of individuals such as Dziga Vertov, John Grierson, and Pare Lorentz. As many scholars have noted, there is something inherent in documentary codes that produces a network of effects as seemingly

real and that gives documentary the potential to operate with concrete consequences in the world. This power has always been a part of the documentary form.⁴

Recently, however, the conceptual and practical architecture that comprise what we call “documentary” has begun to unravel, and in its place has emerged a proliferation of new platforms and interfaces that have reshaped the form, along with its potential to produce political effects. This transformation in the technical apparatus of production and distribution occurred at the same time as the entry of funders seeking to use film, especially documentary, to promote social change. Both of these innovations occurred over the period I was making *Lioness*. My codirector and I began the project in 2005 with the aim of following a long-established model in which a filmmakers’ major effort went into raising funds and producing and directing a film. Distribution and exhibition, by contrast, received far less attention, in part because distribution options were fairly limited and straightforward.⁵ By the time we finished in 2008, the conventional structures of filmmaking were collapsing, and new digital technologies were raising the possibility of alternative forms of distribution.⁶ Meanwhile, socially conscious funders were becoming a notable presence in the indie film space, a shift reflected in the industry’s growing reliance on new marketing and business models and new partnerships with nongovernmental organizations. Together, these trends created the conditions for a new focus that coalesced under the term “impact.” Consequently, like other filmmakers, we found ourselves forced to reconceptualize the way we thought about creating and disseminating our projects.

The depth of these changes, which I analyze below, pushes us to recognize that no longer a single inviolate text, documentary is now structurally presumed to have different forms of life, to exist in different modalities, extended across multiple platforms and networks. From a film’s outreach plan to its crowd-sourced online funding campaign, from its Facebook page to community screenings, where the filmmaker and film subjects are present, from its mobile app to interactive video games, these different modalities present a challenge to our understanding of the ontology of film by rendering the boundary between the inside and outside of a work increasingly porous.

THE CHANGING ECONOMY OF THE LONG-FORM DOCUMENTARY

Contemporary long-form nonfiction film is an increasingly important global art form and critical cultural practice. It occupies a zone that is totally commodified, yet it claims something beyond that; its mission is its value added. In an era of mass-media consolidation, long-form documentaries constitute an alternative space of investigation, debate, and active questioning of traditional channels of

knowledge production and validation. Deploying a methodology of discovery and immersion in a social world or problem, they seek to describe the dynamics of an unfolding present. What gets created formally comes out of an experience of something and a belief that it is worth knowing about. Thus, built into the form is a contract with the audience that it seeks to engage or address viewers as public actors.

Documentary's status as a commodity grew in the 1990s and 2000s following the theatrical release of films such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), a critical look at the Bush presidency that grossed \$119 million at the box office, *Supersize Me* (2004), Morgan Spurlock's first-person documentary about fast food that took in \$11 million domestically, and Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), a film about Al Gore's film about global warming that grossed over \$24 million in the United States.⁷ The success of these films dramatically raised expectations for documentaries to function both as commercially successful entertainment and as political tools. Many of those who saw *Fahrenheit 9/11* subsequently subscribed to his website and become active in related causes. Six weeks after *Supersize Me's* debut in theaters, McDonald's dropped its supersize portions.⁸ *An Inconvenient Truth*,⁹ released two years later, reached millions and has been widely credited with igniting debate over climate change, setting press agendas, and influencing politicians, companies, and environmental activists.¹⁰ It was at once a film and a dispersed cultural process from the advertising campaign and numerous screenings at film festivals, in theaters, and on television, to the long-tail aftermath of the work on DVD and its widespread use by educators, activists, legislators, and many others in living rooms, classrooms, courtrooms, and Congressional hearing rooms.

At the other end of the economic scale, a different mode of financially successful and politically engaged filmmaking was pioneered by Robert Greenwald, whose grassroots socially networked documentary practice centered on his house-party model, in which audiences of like-minded viewers were invited to view the films. The emergence of digital outlets, along with the DVD format, meant that filmmakers such as Greenwald could eschew traditional film screenings altogether and use domestic dvd consumption as both a viable financial mechanism and a new political tool. This represented a dramatic reshaping of the possibilities for documentary funding. The retail strategy that Chris Anderson termed "the long tail," by which profit can be made from small sales over a long period of time by marketing directly to a targeted segment of consumers, highlighted the Internet's ability to create a platform for niche goods.¹¹ Greenwald was one of the first filmmakers to apply this strategy and his success led it to become a standard option for documentarians.¹²

The success of nonfiction works such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and *Supersize Me*, as well as *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War* and *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, inaugurated a new structure of

filmmaking that has become a model for other independents, one based on the expectation that their work should not just *represent* political conditions, but actually *change* them. In ways that echo the early years of cinema, a film is just one part of a far broader array of activities, and “documentary” should now properly refer to the dispersed cultural texts and practices within which a film lives a socially diverse life—spread across a variety of screens in a networked media environment.

One extreme example of the diffusion of a film into a broader campaign took place in March 2012 with the release of the viral documentary *Kony 2012*. Developed by the Christian evangelical nongovernmental organization Invisible Children, *Kony 2012* was designed, depending on whose point of view you take, either to bring visibility to human rights atrocities in Uganda or to use human rights atrocities in Uganda to build a mass movement in the United States.¹³ As several analyses have shown, the film was the outcome of a sedimented activist infrastructure which is thematized within the film itself.¹⁴ In this sense it becomes what the anthropologist Christopher Kelty terms a “recursive public,” a public that foregrounds its own communicative infrastructure.¹⁵ The film portrays the experiences of an ex-child soldier from the Lord’s Resistance Army and then goes on to show scenes in which it deploys that interview in public lectures designed to build a campaign. From there, it instructs viewers on how to join this campaign and offers clear information about the architecture of relay and dissemination by which the campaign is spread. It is a remarkable text in that it so thoroughly collapses the distinction between film text and media campaign as to make the two indissoluble.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AND THE DOUBLE BOTTOM LINE

About a decade ago, a new set of social actors appeared on the independent film scene who had made a significant amount of money in the technology sector.¹⁶ Many of these individuals created private foundations with the aim of deploying their considerable wealth to help solve society’s most pressing problems. Unlike most of the arts, which were given a short shrift by the new philanthropists, documentary film was viewed as a cultural genre well suited to their goal of addressing deep-seated global issues such as the AIDs pandemic, poverty, discrimination, lack of access to education and healthcare, and human rights abuses. Consequently, they made social issue filmmaking a priority.

Led by individuals such as Jeff Skoll, former president of eBay, social entrepreneurs began investing heavily in documentaries. While philanthropic organizations such as the Ford and MacArthur Foundations have long underwritten public media projects, until recently their spending on social issue documentaries has been relatively modest. In contrast, the “filmanthropists”—a phrase coined by

former AOL executive and creator of SnagFilms, Ted Leonis—quickly energized the indie film sector with their deep pockets and passion.

As believers in investment rather than charity, the filmanthropists brought with them a commitment to the “double bottom line”—the potential of their philanthropy to produce financial as well as social returns and a belief that making the nonprofit world responsible to financial discipline would create a more sustainable practice.¹⁷ This approach, known as “impact investing,” challenged the assumption in the traditional grant-making world that creating financial value and social value are necessarily different pursuits.

The concept of impact as used by social entrepreneurs merges two dissimilar things.¹⁸ On the one hand, it refers to demonstrable political effects something can have in the real world, such as, for instance, helping to raise money for new schools in the developing world, as the film *A Small Act* did in Kenya in 2010.¹⁹ On the other hand, the term refers to the institutionalization of audit practices through the introduction of a set of concrete performance criteria by which such change can be imagined and then assessed. In other words, for social entrepreneurs, much like money managers, the key issue is to invest in socially valuable projects that can provide quantifiable returns. They place great emphasis on measuring their investments’ effectiveness using valuation tools such as algorithms to help them in their calculations. In this their approach differs from the political culture of grant making by old-money private foundations such as Rockefeller, Ford, and Carnegie, which were large, opaque institutions with huge endowments that focused on social and scientific problems requiring the expenditure of funds over a period of years without expectation of financial return.

The vision behind the new philanthropists’ change agenda is exemplified by the mission statement of Skoll’s film production company, Participant Media:

The company seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference. To facilitate this Participant creates specific social action campaigns for each film and documentary designed to give voice to issues that resonate in the films. Participant teams with social sector organizations, non-profits and corporations who are committed to creating an open forum for discussion, education, and who can, with Participant, offer specific ways for audience members to get involved. These include action kits, screening programs, educational curriculums and classes, house parties, seminars, parties and other activities and are ongoing “legacy” programs that are updated and revised to continue beyond the film’s domestic and international theatrical, DVD and television windows.²⁰

One of the striking things about the new philanthropists’ approach is the commitment to strategic partnerships with nongovernmental organizations and other

stakeholders in an issue with whom filmmakers are expected to consult during the filmmaking process and the social-action campaign (see fig. 1). The idea is that by consulting with partners during the production process, filmmakers ensure that their projects will reach target audiences and that their messages will fit into the needs of the activists who hope their cause will benefit from the film's circulation.

A key example of this can be seen in a report by the Fledgling Fund, a private foundation that funds innovative media projects and that was one of the first organizations to codify the practices underpinning the emergent social-issue film-funding model.²¹ Once a film is in distribution, the report notes, the task is to let people know that the film is available and to get them interested in watching it:

This phase of outreach and strategic communication is largely determined by how the film fits into the social movement, how the movement itself has connected with the film, embraced it and worked with the filmmaker to understand the message it conveys, how it fits into the needs of the social movement and how the members of this movement can see it. In order to do this effectively, film teams (made up of filmmakers, outreach and engagement coordinators, movement builders and/or leaders/organizers) have to think critically about how and where the film's message should be conveyed.²²

The moment after a film ends, when "audience emotions are tangible," the filmmaking team, with the support of its partners, "has a real opportunity to move the audience from passive to active."²³ "Audience engagement" is the term used to describe when the film team attempts to maximize this energy by suggesting specific actions that people can take, having them sign up for e-mail lists, connecting them to potential local partners working on the issues, and so on. According to Fledgling, these "asks" should be generated in collaboration with the partners to help them energize their base, raise money, and educate more people about the issue in the film, among other things. In other words, audience engagement is what happens after audiences see the film and want to use their energy, resources, ideas, connections, or time to make a difference.²⁴

While the idea of outreach and audience engagement is not new, the institutionalization of the concept and its associated practices through the creation of a number of funding organizations and nonprofit initiatives between 2006 and 2011 was unprecedented.²⁵ Entities such as Working Films, the Fledgling Fund, Chicken & Egg Pictures, Active Voice, BRITDOC, the Good Pitch, and Just Films, to name just a few, provided significant funding, mentoring, and pitching opportunities, as well as outreach and audience-engagement advice and support. Together, they provided the scaffolding for a dramatic elaboration of this particular subgenre of documentary.

The influence of these funders' functionalist orientation is evident in the

criteria that applicants are generally expected to meet in order to secure funding. In their proposals, social-change filmmakers must be ready to define the processes that might lead to “outcomes” and be able to outline social change goals that are “tangible, realistic, and measurable” (fig. 2). Questions that filmmakers need to ask themselves now include “what is the goal? Who are the target audience(s)? What are the goals for these target audiences? What is the best way to reach and activate those audiences during both outreach and audience engagement?”²⁶ Answering such questions as a way of envisioning “strategic outreach” involves thinking pragmatically about how a film will circulate.²⁷ Of course, once a film finally makes its encounter with the world, its effects cannot be controlled—like any aesthetic form, its horizon is open.

We discovered the need for planning strategic outreach while making *Lioness*. For us, the filmmaking process entailed the usual steps: developing the story idea, researching characters, shooting, and editing. However this time around, it included an additional step—the creation of a plan for how to maximize the film’s impact. The inclusion of this information in our proposals, framed as our “outreach and audience engagement plan,” was required in most of our funding applications. So before reaching the rough-cut stage, we had already begun to imagine the forms of circulation the film might take, who its target audience would be, which partners would help us spread the word, and what social action we might suggest viewers could take in relation to the issues represented in the film. In other words, in order to obtain funding, we were expected to imagine how our film would circulate in the future and what kind of impact on the world that circulation would have. This imagined future structured the condition of possibility for the film.

Cinema scholar Michael Renov has observed that the documentary form’s ability to persuade is built first “on the ontological promise of the photographed image, its suggestion that what appears on screen once existed in the world.”²⁸ This appearance, based on indexical verisimilitude, produces a network of effects as seemingly real that allows certain claims to be made. However, the effects take on a facticity as they circulate through networks patterned in ways that imbue them with authority and relevance. Documentary practices, from preproduction to production, postproduction, distribution, exhibition, outreach, and audience engagement, form the basis of the network through which claims circulate and become sensible.²⁹

David Whiteman underscores this idea when he argues that “to assess impact adequately, we must evaluate the entire filmmaking process, including both production and distribution and not just the finished product. A film’s development, production and distribution create extensive opportunities for interaction among producers, participants, activists, decision makers, and citizens and thus all stages

of a film can affect its impact.”³⁰ Documentary film is at once a form of policy analysis and a node in a larger “issue network” consisting of the filmmaker, activist organizations, social movements, decision makers, and policy elites.³¹ Flipping the focus from the film to the campaign in which it is embedded, in other words, reveals a film’s performative power as it circulates, connecting different actors and arenas and in so doing, producing political effects.

By 2008, not only had documentary filmmakers begun to receive significant support to underwrite outreach and audience engagement around the issues represented in their work, they were in fact getting more money for outreach than they were for production, with the trend catching on with traditional funders, as well.³²

Despite the flourishing of this corner of the documentary world, devising a metrics of impact suitable for the medium remains a challenge. In one study sponsored by Channel 4 BRITDOC, a foundation based in London, the author struggles



FIGURE 2 In an attempt to assess a film’s impact, the Fledgling Fund created a visual framework organized around what it considers to be key indicators of success that are concrete and measurable. Fully aware that realizing change is a long and complex process, Fledgling uses the framework as a working model to help structure how it develops and evaluates the projects it funds. Many other funders as well as nongovernmental organizations have adopted this visualization as part of their efforts to make sense of the dynamics of film and social change (image © 2008 The Fledgling Fund).

to identify the best models and methodologies one might apply to determine the value of *An Inconvenient Truth*:

How do we value a film like *An Inconvenient Truth* (AIT)? It is not obvious with AIT whose value should be measured. The value the film had to investors? Its value to audiences? Or to the nation? And *what* should we measure? The money it made? The money it saved? The damage to the planet which was avoided? The contribution to public awareness? The place it had in people's hearts? Should the film be valued as a cultural artifact? Or as an instrument of social change? And which models and methods should we employ?³³

The questions posed above reveal the challenge of applying audit technologies—practices of measurement and evaluation in the name of responsibility and accountability—to artistic phenomenon. They also reveal the assumptions embedded in the notion of a metrics of impact: Can change be quantified? Is change linear, i.e. does it always go from story to action? Is more impact always better? How transposable are the criteria through which impact is measured in different cultural and political contexts? In other words, the notion of impact, which purports to be neutral, is in fact not. The conditions of possibility for what counts as impact have a history and a structure that makes or allows certain kinds of work to be visible and other kinds not.

THE NEW PARADIGM

As I have outlined, new funding practices and market shifts in the independent film industry came together to set up conditions for a new emphasis on social-issue documentaries in the latter half of the aughts. But the focus on change is also tied to the rise of new digital technologies that made certain things possible that were not before.

As the trend toward nonphysical media accelerated, the emergence of alternative distribution models enabled by digital media, including à la carte streaming video, video-on-demand (VOD), and social media, reconfigured the independent film economy. Various attempts to help independent filmmakers, especially documentarians, find their way in the changing marketplace were led by do-it-yourself distribution consultants such as Peter Broderick and Scott Reiss, who urged filmmakers to hold onto their sales rights and sell them off separately, instead of handing them over to one distributor.³⁴ Led by these self-distribution evangelists, a mini industry in DIY distribution and marketing has sprung up, a “virtual infrastructure,” as one observer has called it, that doesn’t compete with Hollywood, but rather is about the creation of a sustainable artist-based alternative.³⁵

As a result of these changes, social-change filmmakers are now encouraged to think of themselves as entrepreneurs whose film practice is essentially a small business. Indeed, like the social entrepreneurs who fund their work, they are encouraged to strive for self-sufficiency through the creation of multiple revenue streams. To assist them in acquiring the necessary skills, many film schools and funders have integrated entrepreneurial training into their programs. For instance, Sundance Institute's new Artists Services Initiative offers tools, access, and aid to filmmakers who want to create a customized system to self-distribute their films. The Independent Filmmaker Project and other film-support organizations now offer hands-on mentorship to teach filmmakers about various forms of distribution, including theatrical release through "four-walling" or paying certain theaters directly for a week-long run.³⁶ Innovations in social media and data analytics, which enable tracking a film's circulation far more effectively than ever before, have allowed filmmakers to go around traditional industry gatekeepers to identify and interact directly with their audiences. This, in turn, has allowed them build a fan base, one that can be mobilized to attend local screenings and take specific actions related to issues in the film and to whom DVDs as well as ancillary products such as T-shirts, posters, hats, and soundtracks can be marketed.

Helen de Michiel captures the complexity of the new technical and business skills filmmakers must master in order to succeed within the new paradigm:

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 agenda, but also reveal stories from and about people who have no narrative presence in the media otherwise.³⁷

De Michiel's observations encapsulate the real paradigm shift that has created a whole new world for filmmaker-entrepreneurs to navigate.

At the same time independent filmmaking is an artisanal practice in that the films are handcrafted with unique and individual qualities, as opposed to mass-produced television shows, for example. Like avant-garde film practices such as those used by the film and photo leagues of the 1930s and the newsreels of the 1940s and 1950s, the independent documentary is an artisanal mode that rejects the commercial production process that dominates Hollywood, and yet historically it has not been shielded from the exigencies of the marketplace.³⁸ The artisanal

quality of social-issue filmmaking is most evident in outreach screenings, which are often premised on the presence of the filmmaker and sometimes the film's subjects, who in being there become a part of the work of art. These "live event / theatrical screenings" stage an encounter not just between the film and the audience, but also between the audience and the film's creator and subjects. These encounters have a performative quality in that they call communities into being around the film-viewing experience.

Although documentaries are embedded in an autonomous marketplace, they remain sensitive to philanthropic imperatives. For some, this is a worrisome fact given the predominance of funders who are focused on using film to make change. The current fixation on outreach and impact has generated considerable internal debate in the industry. It is seen as being at odds, in a way, with independent film's original mission "to make films that aren't prefabricated to hit a target audience of someone else's devising." Critics argue that the drive to fund social issue projects has affected their formal aesthetics, that the balance between storytelling and activism has tilted too far toward activism: "Keeping the artistry in documentary has been hard," noted one well known producer at a recent panel in New York. Others state their concerns about the pressure on films to make change even more directly: "is such hyperbolic politicking too much to ask of films? Should they not be free to document and observe and let audiences make up their own mind?"³⁹

For those who have fully embraced the new social issue documentary funding model, there are still things to be negotiated. Artists have always had patrons, and often patrons want to be in a positive relation with artists, but sometimes the collaboration between filmmakers and their funding partners can be fraught. Indeed, Active Voice, a company that helps filmmakers, funders, and nonprofits devise strategies for the use of media in social-issue campaigns and messaging, created an online multimedia project called The Prenups to service the growing need in the social-issue documentary community for better tools to manage relations between filmmakers and funders:

Filmmakers and funders need each other more than ever. Filmmakers spend years of their lives creating powerful stories that let viewers slip into the skins of people they don't know but come to care about, and these filmmakers need support to tell such high-impact stories. Funders bring tremendous knowledge, networks, analytical skills, money and other resources to social change efforts. They need powerful stories to put human faces on the issues they work on, because doing so helps influence public will. We didn't choose the term Prenups accidentally. We've learned that both parties need language and guidelines in order to understand each other's goals, standards, values and expectations—before they tie the knot.⁴⁰

From the earliest days of the “documentary movement,” as Basil Wright once wrote, filmmakers faced a choice between serving the needs of their “enlightened patrons” and following their own creative instinct as artists. The tension between the two paths for the form continue to shape documentary practice today, as the very existence of the Prenups demonstrates.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The restructuring of documentary after the digital revolution has challenged the ontology of the form, as experience with my own film illustrates. Upon completion in 2008, *Lioness* was screened in festivals, broadcast on television, downloaded and streamed online and sold on DVD via a range of outlets. In addition to being spread across a number of platforms, the film was extended and supplemented by the creation of additional content, including material for two websites, bonus features for the DVD, a five minute video op ed, blog posts, and a study guide. *Lioness* came to exist in other semiotic modalities as well—in the responses posted by viewers of the film online and the face-to-face conversations we had with audiences around the country during our outreach campaign.

The film’s circulation helped crystallize a set of concerns about military and veteran women that had not been articulated yet but was in the air and ripe for revelation. It did so by stitching together a heterogeneous range of actors from disparate realms—soldiers, veterans, military and VA medical professionals, social workers, politicians, activists—who had no inherent existence as a unified community except through the mediation of the film. My codirector and I documented the emergence of this new formation and its political effects in a nineteen page “impact” report, creating yet another form of our film’s existence.⁴²

Documentary film has been affected not just by the rise of new architectures of distribution and exhibition, but also by a broader process in society, one that is reshaping contemporary life, namely the migration of calculative technologies of accounting into social and cultural realms. Both private and public sector activities are increasingly structured around calculations of costs and benefits, estimates of financial returns, assessments of performance and risk, and other forms of numerical and financial representation.⁴³ As we know this ongoing economization of the social field, best exemplified by a shift to viewing metrics as the only legitimate tool to measure effectiveness, has raised problematic issues in arenas such as universities, schools, hospitals, and professional sports. What happens when audit practices are applied to artistic production? What does it mean to attempt to standardize unique cultural works—to make the previously incalculable calculable—through the imposition of quantifiable goals and benchmarks? The infiltration

of economic reasoning into the independent film sector, as I have suggested, has been of significant consequence but much more work remains to be done on the topic.

NOTES

1. See Meg McLagan, "Human Rights, Testimony, and Transnational Publicity," in Michel Fehr (ed.), with Gazelle Krikorian and Yates McKee, *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 304–17.
2. Social labor is part of the process of assembly, association, and translation through which knowledge is produced and sustained by a network of interdependent interacting agents, what Bruno Latour calls in *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). In my essay "Spectacles of difference: Cultural Activism and the Mass Mediation of Tibet," in Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (eds.), *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 90–111, I explore the role of public-relations experts as cultural brokers or translators of cross-cultural knowledge about Tibetan Buddhism in the context of transnational Tibet activism.
3. In Meg McLagan, "Circuits of Suffering," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28. 2 (2005), pp. 223–39, I analyze the networks and social practices that shape the way local concerns get translated into narratives and discursive forms that register as legitimate human rights claims in an international context. For more on the architecture of circulation, see Brian Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy," in *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 217–41, and Larkin, "Making Equivalence Happen: Commensuration and the Grounds of Circulation" in Patricia Spyer and Mary Steedly (eds.), *How Images Move* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
4. Nonfiction film, as a "discourse of sobriety," has long operated under the assumption "that they can and should alter the world or our place within it, that they can effect action and entail consequences." Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 67.
5. Traditionally, film release entailed the sale of a finished film to a distributor who guaranteed theatrical distribution and took all rights. Ceding control of her rights, a filmmaker usually saw little revenue in the end but was free to move on to her next project instead of having to put substantial time into trying to reach audiences.
6. The numbers tell a dramatic story: of thirty-eight film-financing firms that existed in 2007, only eleven remained in 2011. Wall Street invested \$2 billion into independent films (fiction and nonfiction) between 2005 and 2007. That number dropped precipitously after 2008. In addition, due to the recession, the industry experienced a decline of the presale market and the DVD market, and overall returns diminished. Such developments made it difficult to construct a financial model by which a single, independently produced feature film could return

- on its investment through conventional distribution channels. Alicia Van Couvering, "Slump-days," *Filmmaker* 18.2 (Winter 2010), p. 90.
7. See "Documentary, 1982–Present," Box Office Mojo, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>.
 8. The company claimed its decision had nothing to do with the film, but observers have argued otherwise.
 9. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006 and won two Academy Awards, and Al Gore went on to win a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for his work.
 10. See Jess Search, *Beyond the Box Office: New Documentary Valuations*, Channel 4 BRITDOC Foundation, May 2011, http://www.documentary.org/images/news/2011/AnInconvenient-Truth_BeyondTheBoxOffice.pdf, for a detailed evaluation of *An Inconvenient Truth*'s "social return on investment."
 11. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2006).
 12. For a recent analysis of Greenwald's house party strategy, see Chuck Tryon, "Digital Distribution, Participatory Culture, and the Transmedia Documentary," *Jump Cut* 53 (Summer 2011), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/TryonWebDoc/index.html>.
 13. See Josh Kron's discussion of Invisible Children's evangelical roots, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/mission-from-god-the-upstart-christian-sect-driving-invisible-children-and-changing-africa/255626/>. For information on Invisible Children's connection to conservative evangelical entities whose controversial practices include supporting anti-homosexual legislation in Uganda: <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2012/3/11/145213/275/>.
 14. Brian Larkin, personal communication. See also Gilad Lotan, "Kony 2012: See How Invisible Networks Helped A Campaign Capture the World's Attention." *Social Flow*, March 14, 2012, <http://blog.socialflow.com/post/7120244932/data-viz-kony2012-see-how-invisible-networks-helped-a-campaign-capture-the-worlds-attention>.
 15. Christopher M. Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
 16. In addition, the boom in hedge funds and private equity markets in the aughts created staggering amounts of wealth for the individuals involved, some of whom also invested in social-issue documentaries.
 17. Ted Leonsis, "Ted Leonsis on Filmanthropy," American University Center for Social Media, August 2, 2007, <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/blog/making-your-media-matter/ted-leonsis-filmanthropy>.
 18. In *Global Accountabilities: Participation, Pluralism, and Public Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Alnoor Ebrahim and Edward Weisbrand argue that the nonprofit and philanthropic sector was transformed in the 1990s by a powerful mantra—accountability—and that impact is the most recent manifestation of this discourse.
 19. Vincent Stehle, "How Documentaries Have Become Stronger Advocacy Tools," *The Chronicle of Higher Philanthropy*, October 2, 2011, <http://philanthropy.com/article/A-Revolution-in-Documentaries/129202>.
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