TOWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY

An Essay in Collaborative Activist Media Production

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A NOTE TO THE READER

This report on Newsreel's stakeholder-based media design process is divided into five self-contained parts offering contrasting approaches to the subject. It is not intended that most readers struggle through them all but only those pertinent to their particular field of interest. The five headings below link directly to the corresponding section.

I. Prolegomena. The report begins with an overview of the theoretical consideration which informed the development of Newsreel's design prototype. Written in the spirit of self-parody, it is not recommended for readers with a low tolerance for theory.

II. Why Social Justice Media is Anti-Social. The paper continues with a frankly polemical critique of existing social justice film production and funding with special reference to the Ford Foundation's recent JustFilms initiative. It calls for a radical revision of these practices as a pre-condition for making activist media accountable to its stakeholders.

III. User-Centered Media Design. Next, the report describes a collaborative design prototype developed and implemented by Newsreel and assesses some of its strengths and weaknesses. Readers who, like the author, find methodology a bore are advised to skip this section.

IV. Needs Assessment Findings. It then summarizes the findings of two needs assessments conducted by Newsreel during the second half of 2010 surveying over 500 social justice media activists and educators. Readers will find the statistics and tables here the most concrete part of the report.

V. Some Suggestions for Further Research. The essay concludes with a roving discussion of several subjects requiring more rigorous analysis before activist media production can become accountable to activists. In the process, more sacred cows are gored.

It should be emphasized that at best this report identifies issues deserving more serious investigation than it can provide. Accordingly, it should be judged by the questions it asks, not the answers it mumbles. In addition, it represents solely and unapologetically the views of its author which are not necessarily those of California Newsreel or its board.

TOWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY:
An Essay in Collaborative Activist Media Production

"The problem is not to make political films but to make films politically."
                                                            - Jean-Luc Godard

As a distributor of social issue documentaries for forty-three years, Newsreel has found itself on the frontlines of activist media use, caught in the cross-fire between filmmakers' intentions and film users' needs. From this vantage point, I have observed with dismay a widening gap between the social justice films produced and the ones Newsreel's constituents say they need. The problem has become so acute that over the last three years out of over one hundred documentaries previewed on a single subject, Newsreel found exactly one which it could in good faith recommend to film users. The rest were either redundant or irrelevant, too long or too unfocused, too simple-mined or too superficial.

This disparity seems unavoidable in the absence of *systematic* and *substantive* input from social justice media users into the decisions over which social justice documentaries are proposed, funded and produced. Without transparent ascertainment of stakeholders' needs and objective evaluation of stakeholders' outcomes, media gatekeepers — producers, funders, broadcasters and distributors — can only fall back on personal inclination, intuition and caprice.

Newsreel has therefore been compelled to ask: could there be a better way? Could Newsreel design a process which would link their films more integrally to the actual needs of their intended users — social activists and educators? As a step towards a solution, Newsreel patched together a "user-centered" design prototype which assesses stakeholders' needs and preferences *prior* to conceiving and producing any content. The heart of the process is a "stakeholder design group" or "user network" which collaborates with Newsreel in every stage of the project.

Newsreel has begun to implement this process in the two social justice areas where they are currently focusing their resources. The successes and limitations of this design prototype only strengthen the conviction that a body of evidence-based best practices in social justice media production is urgently needed if social justice media is to become fully accountable to the needs of social justice activism.

I. PROLEGOMENA: THEORETICAL DIVAGATIONS

The Subjects of Documentary. Any discussion of accountability in social justice documentary must begin by asking: accountable to whom? Who or what is the subject of an activist media practice? "Social media," Facebook or YouTube, is accountable only to its author who is usually also its subject matter. Similarly, personal and essayistic documentaries have a reflexive, first person subject, the filmmaker or an alter-ego. Ethnographic and journalistic documentaries

claim, however questionably, to be accountable to their content, the third person, pro-filmic, subject matter. In contrast to these, activist media, I will argue, is accountable to its audience: the second-person, viewing subject, the subject-in-history, and hence, the agent of social change. In activist media, therefore, the viewing subject and the subject matter are one.

Diegetic Convergence. One consequence of this identity of subject and subject matter is the convergence or even disintegration of diegetic or narrative space/ time. The text becomes so porous that the context seeps inside, invigorating or inundating the content, depending on your point of view; the media interface becomes a permeable membrane. The epistemological distinction, always dubious, between actual and virtual begins to blur; both "realities" tremble when confronted with their own constructedness. This destabilizes the authority and authoriality of the documentary text while it defamiliarizes and problematizes the audience's sense of presence. In this place of aporia, an anticipatory hyper-space, both immanent and proleptic, can be projected.

Screen/ Mirror/ Door. In most cinematic practices, the screen screens out the circumambient space and the social relations imbricating it, leaving the audience in the dark. The present absence on the screen absents the present around it; thus, it becomes not just the coffin of the past but the present as well, haunted by a double ghost, a spatiotemporal black hole. Activist documentary, in contrast, aspires to reverse the cinematic apparatus, displacing and dispersing presence from the screen back onto the audience, the space before the screen and the world beyond it. In this sense, the screen becomes a mirror, lens and spotlight where the audience, to quote Marx, "is forced to confront with sober face the real conditions of its life and its relations with its kind." Activist documentary aspires to change the site of passive reception into a theatre of social agency. The screen acts like a "window on the world," not on an elsewhere but on the here and now. This window also frames or reframes the world by offering a new point *of* view and, as importantly, a new point *for* viewing. This screen/ window then become a door, a threshold to the future, inviting the audience, no longer spectators but actors, back into a history transformed by becoming transformable.

Context Contra Content. Activist media can only limn such liminal spaces if its viewers step through its door into an environment suffused with social intentionality, where they can translate insight into action and apply new perspectives to their immediate surroundings. As a result, context becomes as important as content, the quality of viewing as critical as the quantity. An activist media practice starts from an audience — or user-centered understanding of cinematic semantic circulation. It rejects the "fetish of the text" and the privileging of its meaning-making over the audience's own construction of meanings. It theorizes audience reception as more than reading - hegemonic, oppositional or deconstructive. Hermeneutics morphs imperceptibly into rhetoric - writing, rewriting and writing over the text. If academics can have an Oedipal relationship with the text, why not audiences?

Architexture. Emerging trans-media architecture has the potential for creating such socially empowering contexts online. Documentary content can be nested in a heteronomous para-text where one-dimensional, linear film is embedded in a three-dimensional array of superimposed discursive registers. Locative devices and hyperlinks overlay transgressive topographies and polyrhythmic temporalities. The document becomes saturated in contesting social narratives which can be projected along multiple vectors. Such a platform enables viewers, reconceived as users, to manipulate this "expanded document" in a fluid space/ time where social reality is constructed, not just filmed and viewed.

The Activist Text. Such a user-centered media context has immediate implications for the documentary text. Activist film and video is explicitly conceived as open-ended, fragmentary and polysemous. Activist media anticipates its transformative appropriation into another context, the context of its use. Similarly, activist documentary is designed (produced) and delivered (distributed) in a form which can be subsumed (exhibited) seamlessly and self-effacingly into existing activist sites, on- and off-line. Documentary would no longer perform in front of its audience but be performed *by* it, no longer entertain but enable.[1] In short, an activist media practice renounces cinema's compulsive exhibitionism, silences its century long monologue and enters into a civil and civic conversation. "Fin du cinema" once again.

The Activist Context. Advocacy organizations, community groups, social service agencies, schools and universities are where these conversations are taking place. They offer the structured viewing contexts necessary to breathe life into the documentary text by participating integrally in the process of social change not simply documenting it. Activists and educators are, not surprisingly, by far the largest users of social issue documentary. Thus the answer to the question which opened this section is that activist media is logically accountable to activists who are its most immediate stakeholders.[2] Such socially engaged media contexts are not platform-specific; they could be a Facebook page in Egypt, a neighborhood meeting in Oakland or, for that matter, a class on documentary film at NYU.[3] Why then is more and more social justice media funding being funneled into productions aimed at a television, theatrical and YouTube audience? I hope to unearth some answers in the following section.

II. WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE MEDIA IS ANTI-SOCIAL

Social justice documentaries bear a largely serendipitous relation to social justice activism because the filmmakers, television networks and foundations which produce them are not producing them for the organizers and educators who are their ultimate users. There are many compelling reasons for making a documentary — entertainment, art, journalism, instruction — each with its distinct idiom, viewing culture and purpose. There is no reason to expect — or claim — that films made primarily for theatres, television and home entertainment work well on activist websites, in classrooms or for community organizing.

The Filmmakers. Independent filmmakers need to garner critical recognition to attract the funding to do what they do well — make films. Increasingly, this has come to mean an annual

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[1] It may be helpful to recall the etymology of entertainment: *tenere* – to hold, keep and *inter* - inside of. The familiar encomia for films, "en-thralling," "en-trancing," "absorbing," "spell-binding," "eyeball-grabbing," "compelling" share to an uncanny degree, a sense of "possessing," even ingesting, the viewer into the text.

[2] The *ultimate* stakeholders of activist media are, of course, its audience, the yet-to-be-activated social actors. They, however, can't be reached unless the *proximate* stakeholders, organizers and educators, perceive and use a documentary as a tool to activate them.

[3] Despite the millions of dollars invested in social issue documentaries over the years, there have been, to the best of my knowledge, no rigorous U.S. studies of their comparative effectiveness over less expensive media formats or face-to-face organizing. The Channel 4 Britdoc Foundation's reports on *The End of the Line* and *An Inconvenient Truth* (http://site.britdoc.org/pages/983/view) suggest some of questions which need to be asked, although they ask them after the documentaries were produced rather than before.

pilgrimage to that cinematic Lourdes, the Sundance Film Festival.[4] There, the assembled moguls, celebrities and pundits anoint the "quirky," low-budget features and "edgy" new directors who prove, if only to themselves, that Hollywood has a social conscience and artistic soul. This would be a harmless, if vapid, social ritual if more and more social justice documentaries weren't being explicitly designed for a few screenings in a snowdrift. Unscrupulous consultants work the countless après ski parties preying on producers' vanity and avarice with unsubstantiated promises of theatrical, DVD and direct-to-digital box office boffo down the road. The *actual* audiences for these films — organizers and educators, communities and students — are the losers because they aren't influential, lucrative or glamorous enough to cut a figure at these events.

The Broadcasters. The dwindling number of television backers of social issue documentaries, ITVS, PBS FRONTLINE, HBO, survive by drawing members, subscribers, corporate underwriters and advertisers to their programming. They are, therefore, more intent on eye-balls than activism; indeed, the only action which interests them is the viewers' fickle finger on the remote. They are perfectly aware their audience doesn't settle down for a supine evening in front of the TV to be booted off their couch into civic activism; a familiar storyline, heart-warming characters and uplifting moral is all the social justice they can take.

The Funders. Foundations, the other significant source of funding for social justice film and video, often have less experience in media grant-making than in their other program areas. As a result, they are highly susceptible to the latest social panaceas, technological gimmickry and media "buzz." Too often, they apply mass media strategies to social justice filmmaking, opting for the quick-fix of a glitzy blockbuster over the homespun, issue-oriented films needed for the long slog of social change organizing. The result: a foundation's big media splash ends up just a drop in the bucket.

The Oligarchs. It is too rarely noted that 90% of the social issue documentaries actually viewed in this country are funded by only a half-dozen major foundations and television networks. The ultimate decisions about which documentaries get made and which issues get represented rest in the hand of five or ten people. The FCC might see this as an oligopoly even more concentrated than the commercial media. It is, therefore, all the more critical that transparent lines of accountability link these gatekeepers to the ostensible beneficiaries — the organizers, educators and ordinary citizens who are the real agents of social change.

The Missing Link. Unhappily, social issue documentaries' necessary and laudable *independence* from the discipline of the marketplace has not been replaced by an equally necessary and laudable *dependence* on the needs of social justice stakeholders. How could they, when these films are proposed, selected, produced and evaluated without input from their users — activists and educators? In the absence of robust accountability structures, a culture bordering on impunity has flourished, incestuous, insulated and increasingly irrelevant to the most important economic and political forces shaping American society.[5]

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[4] Like any religious shrine, Sundance demonstrates the triumph of faith — or desperation — over empirical evidence. Of over seven thousand films submitted, perhaps a dozen will come away with distribution deals; the odds are better in Las Vegas than Park City.

[5] It is important to remember that the issue of accountability is not simply an ethical one but a legal one as well. Tax-exempt institutions represent a "tax expenditure," government revenues waived on the ground that they are serving a public interest. In an era of Draconian budget cuts, it seems justifiable to ask if these dollars are being spent as effectively and efficiently as the government services they inevitably displace.

Just Film or Just Films. I want to illustrate this failure of accountability by examining the most ambitious social justice media initiative since I came to Newsreel thirty-seven years ago. Last January, the Ford Foundation brought twenty-three CEOs, foundation officers and Hollywood notables plus staff to the aforementioned Sundance Film Festival to announce a major new initiative. Dubbed JustFilms, it will make $50,000,000 available for social justice documentaries. No one was so impolitic to suggest that Park City was a curious venue for bestowing this largesse, given the dearth of social justice activism on the slopes of the Wasatch. Suspicions that the initiative might be more about film than justice were strengthened when Ford revealed that the first $15,000,000 would be re-granted through "signature partnerships" with ITVS and the Sundance and Tribeca Film Institutes. Again, no one expressed surprise that the Foundation could find no organizations more integrally-related to social justice organizing than a television service and two film festivals.[6] The remaining $35,000,000 will be dispensed through the shopworn "open call process," thus, limiting the pool of projects to whatever filmmakers happen to propose to the Ford. The entire $50,000,000 will hence be controlled by the same coterie of documentary grant-makers as in the past.

Ford's Delphic announcement failed to mention any ascertainment or evaluation process which would allow its putative stakeholders to have input into the initiative. If such structures do exist, they certainly aren't transparent since the public has not been apprized of them. In their absence, however, it is difficult to see how Ford can prudently expend its $50,000,000. In a less lofty context, excluding stakeholders from decisions about what media is made for and about them might be construed as a social injustice itself. Ford seems to regard social accountability as a matter of faith or credulity rather than demonstrable outcomes. As a result, there is reason to fear that JustFilms will be just that — just more films — which, I suppose, is Godard's point in the epigram.

The Stakeholders. In contrast to these, the producers of social justice media, its users don't look at film as an end in itself, as a media event, but as a means to an end, as a tool for educating and organizing. They don't address a passive, anomic "audience" of festival-goers or public television viewers but engaged citizens and students. This "disconnect" between the producers and the users of activist media results in bloated epics and Brobdingnagian series which must be a) squeezed into already busy schedules, b) amputated to fit the Procrustean bed of class and meeting periods, c) supplemented with online paraphernalia and d) promoted through million dollar "community engagement campaigns." The need for such panoply could be interpreted as tacit, if unintentional, admission that these films don't work for their purported audiences for the simple reason that these audiences are an afterthought. These profligate community engagement *offensives* would not be necessary if those communities had been engaged in the first place.[7]

No film has ever launched a movement — though many filmmakers and funders have expected they would. The current vogue for organizing around films, what I would describe as "media-centric organizing," is, literally, pre-posterous; activist film should be organized around

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[6] The Sundance and Tribeca Film Institutes are the non-profit arms of Robert Redford's and Robert De Nero's for-profit production companies which are not eligible for Ford funding.

[7] Outreach campaigns enlist local activists as unpaid publicists for broadcasts, theatrical openings and home DVD sales without realizing this diverts them from their core mission — organizing. Their film-centric, "destination" websites accrete interested viewers rather than directly hyper-linking them to activists' own sites. ITVS and Ford are the most ardent advocates and funders of such "strategies."

organizing and not the reverse.[8] This critique, I would be the first to admit, is not often aired in public and could therefore be dismissed as simply the eccentric carping of an old curmudgeon. An old curmudgeon, no doubt, but also an ethnographer for close to forty years of the tribal rituals of social justice filmmaking. Speaking the unspeakable is one of the few luxuries left to age: one need no longer fear the "long-term consequences" of candor — or anything else. The approval or opprobrium of the plenipotentiaries of this world, their perks and reprisals, can neither help nor hinder my slow slide into oblivion.

III. USER-CENTERED MEDIA DESIGN

As the country's oldest distributor and producer of activist documentaries, I am not unaware that Newsreel might with some justice be seen as the most persistent perpetrator of such unaccountable conduct. Perhaps that's why it also appears to be the first to take the obvious but apparently innovative expedient of asking its constituents what media they actually want rather than what we think they should have. Belatedly I admit, Newsreel has begun to explore ways to involve the future users of its media in its design.

Newsreel began by counter-intuitively reversing the traditional, media-centric paradigm, *production > distribution > exhibition* into *exhibition > distribution > production.* It calls this stakeholder — or user-centered design because it ascertains what objectives stakeholders want media to advance (*exhibition),* then determines the forms and formats they prefer to use (*distribution)* and then, and *only then,* scripts the actual content (*production).* In this way, content grows organically out of the context of its use, in what might be thought of as "reverse engineering" activist media.

User-Centered Activist Media Design Prototype
New Design Paradigm: Exhibition > Distribution > Production

1. Environmental Scan/ Resource Audit/ Website Launch
2. Needs Assessment/ Metric Analysis/ Stakeholder Design Group Formed
3. Content Proposal/ Scripting/ Production/ User Testing
4. Outreach Network/ Workshops/ In-Service Training/ Conference Screenings
5. Evaluation/ Double-Blind Studies of Long-Term Outcomes

Newsreel is now implementing a five step collaborative design prototype, an eclectic gallimaufry of standard survey research and project management techniques which it would be the first to admit falls far short of the statistical reliability it desires.[9] Nonetheless, Newsreel has to believe

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[8] The danger has never been that film would become politicized but that politics would become trivialized by film. Paradoxically, political films are too important to be left to filmmakers. Why should we assume movie producers possess more political prescience and probity than plumbers, plastic surgeons or paleontologists?

[9] If it is objected that these are the same techniques employed to test a new brand of tissue paper, I would plead guilty on the grounds that social justice is at least as important as a runny nose. However, Newsreel, as a non-profit, does not design its film to make the greatest profit but the greatest social

that the expressed wishes of its film users are a more reliable guide than its vague impressions or current political enthusiasms.

1. Environmental Scan. The first demand of accountable media design is to identify the stakeholders working around a particular social justice issue, analyze their programs and priorities, inventory their existing media resources, map their patterns of media use and media infrastructure. In the process of this research, Newsreel aggregates a survey sample for the second stage of the process, a media needs assessment. At the same time, the project website is launched with the posting of the findings of the scan.

2. Needs Assessment. The media needs of the stakeholders identified in the scan are measured through online surveys and detailed telephone interviews inquiring into trends in media use, preferred content formats and topics for new acquisitions and productions. Users are deliberately not asked to suggest specific films; instead the questions are designed to help respondents articulate the organizational challenges and objectives media might address.[10] This data is tabulated and the findings tested against a number of common web metrics as well as records for actual documentary use.

3. Stakeholder Design Group. A stakeholder working group or user network is recruited during steps 1 and 2, representing a fluid and inclusive mix of policy experts, organizational leaders and, critically, hands-on media users. The project website is equipped with project management software, FTP capacity and discussion boards to provide the stakeholder design group or user network a transparent interface with all aspects of the production process. This team then "workshops" the findings of the needs assessment into a multimedia production agenda and later reviews and suggests revisions for the different iterations of the proposed content, establishing a recursive feedback loop to maintain stakeholder accountability throughout.

4. Distribution/ Outreach. Distribution and outreach begin as soon as the project is launched and build throughout the production process. The environmental scan and needs assessment themselves generate awareness and a sense of ownership in the project, while its open online architecture encourages continued participation and builds anticipation among the wider field. This stakeholder design group and user-network transition naturally into the nucleus of an outreach network once the project is completed. As a result, a cadre of advocates is already in place to advise and assist Newsreel in its release of the project to assure the content's widest possible use. This obviates the need for a "community engagement strategy" since the community has been engaged over the life of the project.

5. Evaluation. Evaluation not just of the content produced by the design process but the process itself will be essential for establishing any evidence-based, best practices. The stakeholder working group will set measurable objectives at the outset of the project and third-party evaluators will then analyze usage data, user feedback and actual outcomes against the project's stated objectives.

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impact. In addition, its product testing doesn't ask consumers what commodity they would buy but activists what they want media to achieve.

[10] As discussed above, the ultimate users of social justice media are the audiences with whom it is used. A more exhaustive study would need to assess the knowledge base and belief system of the target audiences (see note 18). Newsreel's two studies relied instead on social justice activists to specify what they thought would work best with their constituents.

This prototype is cumbersome and time-consuming and doubtless can and will be compressed; nonetheless, a collaborative design process can be more efficient, effective and hence economical than production by intuition. First, it increases the probability that all the media produced will directly address user's most urgent objectives, eliminating superfluous footage, accelerating production from years to months, cutting waste and conserving user's time. Second, the project content is conceived as supporting and supported by a larger, integrated multimedia learning experience. Film is never the least expensive and often not the most appropriate medium. A user-based design process can weigh the comparative effectiveness of a $10,000 per minute documentary versus podcasts, factsheets and old-fashioned face-to-face organizing and teaching. Finally, digital content can be delivered to stakeholders' sites in a form which interfaces seamlessly with their other own on- and off-line activities.

An Alternative: Filmmaker Residencies. I suspect many filmmakers will react to the idea of a collaborative design process as cramping the space for creativity and as "filmmaking-by-committee." Since Newsreel is itself a producer of social justice documentaries, I am sensitive to the indispensible role film professionals play in media design, but I believe that role needs to be more clearly defined. Stakeholders are the "experts" in the subjects they need treated, filmmakers are the "experts" in how to treat them; activists know the outcomes they want, filmmakers know how media can help reach them.

I know at least one alternative approach for involving stakeholders in media production. It has enjoyed desultory use in Canada, Australia and Britain and is based on "filmmaker residences" or "fellowships" where producers receive a stipend to study the daily life of an organization or community and work with that community to identify where media could make a constructive intervention.[11] A residency also gives filmmakers the time to become fluent in the verbal, cultural and technical idioms of the content's future users. It is as important to compensate the stakeholder as the filmmaker for the time they will need to devote to a project for the collaboration to be successful. At the time this model was initially advanced, a residency required a filmmaker to spend an extended period of time onsite. Today, when so much of an organization's life is transacted online, and when script ideas can be discussed via email and Skype, a residency might be confined to shorter "confidence-building" visits realizing substantial savings for the funder while minimizing dislocation for the producer.

In this model, filmmakers are asked to approach a residency with as few preconceptions about the eventual content as possible, since this would, in effect, hijack the process from the community and vitiate the purpose of the residency. As a safeguard, certain benchmarks for collaboration are set and any proposal for subsequent production funding must be endorsed by both the stakeholders and the filmmaker. If the joint proposal is accepted for production funding, the funder and producer retain final responsibility for seeing that the joint proposal is executed not eviscerated. Collaborative media design and filmmaker residencies are only two strategies for linking activist media production more integrally to its users; doubtless filmmakers, broadcasters and foundations could invent others if they were interested in exploring the possibilities for user-centered social justice media design and production.

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[11] For a description of one such program see: "Challenge for Change: Activist Film at the National Film Board of Canada," Waugh, Thomas, Baker, Michael Brendan, Winton, Ezra, eds., McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.

Another Alternative: Open Space Documentary. Newsreel is not the only producer experimenting with collaborative media design strategies, only the most methodical, perhaps plodding. A new genre, "open space documentary," a term coined by Helen de Michiel and Patricia Zimmermann, joins media makers and communities to generate multimedia content which addresses their specific needs. The following are just a few examples from across the country of this growing trend.

- **Save the Sierra**, a project launched by public radio producer, Catherine Stifter and organizer, jesikah ross, built a multimedia, online platform and mobile "storybooth" where the far-flung residents of this 400 mile-long range can share their stories and discuss the threat of urban encroachment on the region's fragile natural and social ecosystem www.savingthesierra.org.

- In Philadelphia, Scribe Media Center's **Precious Places Community History Project** teams up community organizations, local residents and experienced filmmakers to produce oral history-based videos commemorating local landmarks which are threatened with destruction or not longer exist http://scribe.org/about/preciousplaces.

- In Berkeley, California, the **Lunch Love Community** media project brings together activists behind that city's innovative "slow food," locally-sourced, conscious-eating school meal program with San Francisco's Citizen Film and Portland's Media Working Group. A self-described "slow media" production, they and producer Helen de Michiel have "cooked up" 7 of 15 projected "webisodes" about this national prototype and a long-form documentary is being scripted out of this footage. http://www.lunchlovecommunity.org

- At nearby Highland Hospital in Oakland, filmmaker Peter Nix has set up a DIY "recording studio" in the waiting rooms. Patients make video recordings about their experiences at this public hospital which are then arranged by topic and posted on **The Waiting Room** website http://www.whatruwaitingfor.com/about-the-waiting-room.

- In Mississippi, filmmaker Leah Mahan, local media activists and the Gulf Coast Sustainable Communities Network are recording interviews and blog posts covering the past five eventful years in that area. These are linked to an interactive online map on **The Bridge** project platform http://bridgethegulfproject.org. A full-length documentary, *Turkey Creek,* growing out of these experiences is in post-production.

What most excites Newsreel about these projects is that, in contrast to its stakeholder-based media design prototype, they are not simply focused on creating content but creating contexts where "community can happen." I personally believe that the great documentarians of the future may be the impresarios, orchestrators and engineers of such virtual public stages. In projects like these, the documentary text is no longer fixed but fluid, no longer univocal but choral, no longer syntactic but dialectical, a shifting, evanescent but on-going conversation which never congeals into form but flows according to an evolving, collective sense of shared purpose. In open space documentary, therefore, the process becomes more important than any of the individual products along the way. This is analogous to the role of context in shaping, interpreting and using content in the description of the American Birthright resource banks' open-plan online "architexture" in section IV below.

IV. NEEDS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS: EMERGING TRENDS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE MEDIA USE

In the second half of 2010, Newsreel launched two parallel user-based design processes one for each of our current program areas — children's health equity and racial justice. The childhood equity project engaged a Ph.D. in statistical sociology with a background in media analysis to design and conduct an environmental scan and needs assessment of this field. Over six months, she compiled a directory of nearly 250 child development advocacy organizations, the most comprehensive list to date, and a resource guide with over 500 media resources, the first on this subject. These resources as well as a 102 page summary of the ascertainment process were used to launch the project website www.americanbirthrightmedia.org. The *American Birthright* needs assessment sample consisted of representatives of 224 stakeholder organizations identified during the scan and analyzed 140 quantitative online survey instruments as well as qualitative responses from 84 hour-long parallel telephone interviews.

Table 1: Composition of Childhood Equity Sample

Sample – 224 (100%)
Advocacy Organizations – 63 (28%)
Professional Organizations – 49 (22%)
Research Centers and Policy Institutes – 33 (15%)
Non-Profit Service Providers – 53 (24%)
Other – 26 (11%)

The racial equity stakeholder sample population consisted of 440 current high-volume users of Newsreel's 100 title African American Perspectives collection, as well as subscribers to Videolib, the video librarians' list-serve, and H-Net AfrAm, a similar site for teachers of African American history. This group received a 30 question online questionnaire which assessed current patterns in media use, format, length and style preferences, as well as topics where new production was needed. In addition, 15 telephone interviews were conducted with national African American advocacy organizations and 311 survey instruments were received and tabulated. They were also compared with readily available web metrics such as journal citations, search term frequencies and site traffic and, more importantly, current circulation and use data for African American documentaries at college and university libraries for related documentaries.

Table 2: Composition of Racial Justice Sample

Sample – 311 (100%)
Post-secondary Educators, Counselors, Administrators – 198 (63%)
Secondary Educators, Counselors, Administrators – 41 (13%)
Community Activists/ Educators – 39 (12%)
Policy and Professional Organizations – 15 (5%)
Other – 18 (7%)

The childhood equity project's stakeholders' design group has proceeded to script-development and is scheduled to begin production in fall 2011. The racial equity project is still recruiting

members for its user design network in preparation for proposing a production/ acquisition agenda by the beginning of 2012. The findings from these two needs assessments may have implications for a wider spectrum of activist media practices.[12]

Newsreel was interested in investigating anecdotal reports of increased use of clips in place of full-length documentaries so both samples were specifically asked about this practice. When the results were pooled,[13] they revealed wide-spread use of excerpts (85%) and a clear preference for shorter films, under 50 minutes (70%), rather than broadcast or feature length. This may lend credence to the speculation in section one that the documentary diegesis is becoming destabilized since excerpts are shifted from their original context, the film, into the context of a classroom or CMS. Many of these clips are shown off DVDs, since another question showed, surprisingly, that 90% of documentary content is still delivered in DVD format not digitally; at the same time, 78% of respondents expected to migrate to a digital platform over the next five years. Digital migration in public institutions lags behind consumer use probably because of the ongoing severe cuts in state and local budgets. This data, however, should not be interpreted as indicative of the death of long-form documentary since a large majority of respondents (74%) reported using *both* excerpts and complete films. It does suggest that regarding long-form documentary as the pre-eminent form of social issue, non-fiction may be anachronistic and distract critical attention from emerging documentary formats more idiomatic to an online environment.

Table 3: Length of Content – Use and Preference

Segmentation
% Reporting Using Only Segments >10 min – 11%
% Reporting Using Only Complete Films <50 min – 15%
% Reporting Using Both Segments and Complete Films – 74%

(501 responses; sample = 535)

Length
Preferred Length >10 min – 26%
Preferred Length 10-30 min – 19%
Preferred Length 30-50 min – 25%
Preferred Length <50 min – 7%
No Preference – 23%

(508 responses; sample = 535)

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[12] Like any study, Newsreel's contained unavoidable sampling biases and their results need to be interpreted with this in mind. The child equity cohort was weighted towards active members of child advocacy and related professional organizations rather than a random sampling of child development practitioners. The racial equity respondents included a high number of post-secondary users of Newsreel titles, therefore predisposed to existing documentary formats. In addition, the sample focused only on users of African American content; hence the results only have validity for stakeholders in that arena.

[13] Combining data from different survey populations introduces imprecision even when identical questions are asked. Newsreel felt justified in doing so because the results from all three survey cohorts displayed in Tables 3 and 4 tracked each other within a range of + or – 3%.

I don't think we can read these results with complete equanimity. Segmentation clearly disintegrates the cumulative, multi-layered, systemic analysis possible in a long-form documentary. We should also recall that this move towards generic, 3-minute "learning objects" was in part precipitated by rigid state frameworks designed to depoliticize the curriculum by fragmenting broad social movements and themes into isolated events and points, the so-called "power-pointing" of knowledge. Therefore teachers employing such excerpts are responsible for supplying an alternative context at least as structured as that of the original film.[14]

Newsreel also wanted to learn what criteria social justice educators and organizers valued most when deciding to use a documentary. Respondents checked relevance to mission, clarity of presentation and issue or concept focus as their priorities. It is telling that the qualities one suspects are most prized by broadcasters, film festival programmers and foundations — strong storylines, character development and high production values — rank towards the bottom of the list. Yet story — and character-driven documentaries are widely recognized among filmmakers as the "house style" of ITVS, Sundance and Tribeca; indeed, the rubric for Ford's JustFilms initiative is "powerful stories well told," again raising the question: for whom are these documentaries really being made?

Table 4: Determinates of Social Issue Documentary Use

Relevance to curriculum or mission – 88%
Conceptual clarity – 82%
Issue-driven – 75%
Focus/ Concision – 67%
Length – 51%
Peer reviews – 42%
Familiarity with distributor – 33%
Study guides, ancillary materials – 32%
Robust website – 21%
Familiarity with filmmaker – 15%
Strong story line and characters – 13%
Production values – 9%
DVD extras – 6%
Online availability – 5%

(1491 responses; 517 respondents; sample = 535)

I want to pause here to scrutinize this narrative orthodoxy, the assumption that a documentary must be a story, at least insofar as it applies to social justice media users. Story- and character-driven documentaries gravitate towards exceptional incidents rather than their systemic causes; they are attracted to charismatic figures more than the long-term, broad-based organizing that social movements demand. It could even be argued that the more exceptional and dramatic a story is, the more alien it will seem from the everyday, taken-for-granted injustices and

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[14] If students can, indeed, absorb only squibs of film, it might make an interesting pedagogical exercise to snip a 60 minute documentary into bite-size pieces and assign students to piece them back together into a coherent argument, like a jigsaw puzzle.

methodical, day-to-day activities characteristic of the majority of social activist settings. These findings suggest that organizers and educators use documentary more to provide insight than inspiration.

Cui bono from the privileging of story over other documentary strategies if not the electronic bards spinning their myths and ghost stories around a flickering campfire of pixels (for what is video if not a story made out of ghosts)? Not the subjects of the story, surely; they know it all too well; they want to learn how to change it. Perhaps, the listener then; but listening in on other people's stories can be eaves-dropping or in Jill Godmilow's memorable phrase, "political pornography." Isn't the point of activist media for the audience to see itself as actors in that story, not just listeners? And doesn't that require rewriting their roles in both that story and their own story? Perhaps social issue documentary is not so much about story-telling as story-writing, in which case, the central character would be the audience itself, the second person subject identity proposed at the opening of this paper. Activist documentary, then should prepare, perhaps compel, its quondam listener to assume the narrative impetus him or herself by becoming a writer of history.

Newsreel next asked the early childhood stakeholder sample to choose how new media production should frame the issue of developmental disparities to be most useful in their work. We chose these frames from a study done by the FrameWorks Institute (see note 18) and our results confirmed their earlier findings. The first thing one notices, is how unlikely it is to find a program organized around any of these frames on Independent Lens, P.O.V, American Experience, FRONTLINE, HBO, the History, Discovery or the Sundance Channels. A family drama might touch on one of these implicitly or peripherally but, as we've seen, activists have little time for oblique treatments in the hectic world of neighborhood clinics or community college. In contrast, broadcasters are looking for what HBO's Sheila Nevins calls "high concept" documentaries, which I would call "low concept" but high marketability documentaries trading on celebrity, sensationalism and gut- wrenching (or –churning) emotion.

Table 5. American Birthright: Frames Which Would Most Advance Your Work

1. American Prosperity Starts with Its Children: The Social and Economic Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood Development – 74%
2. Building-In Resilience: A Life-Course Perspective on Physical and Mental Health – 51%
3. Supporting Parents by Reducing Economic Inequality – 42%
4. The Impact of Race and Poverty on Early Childhood Development – 38%
5. Bursting the Family Bubble: The Social Ecology of Early Childhood Development – 23%

(221 respondents; 475 responses; sample = 224)

The American Birthright scan and needs assessment also revealed that early childhood interventions cover an exceptionally broad spectrum of settings and objectives. Stakeholders wanted content which both *reframed* child development and *applied* that frame to their specific area of practice. Therefore, the childhood equity design group decided to conceive the

American Birthright project not as a linear documentary but an online resource-bank, a multimedia content ensemble structured around a common framing concept.

Table 6. American Birthright Resource Bank (Schematic)

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RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL  +
 I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I
AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT  +
 I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I
VM – VM – VM – VM – VM –VM – VM – VM – VM – VM –VM – VM – VM – VM – VM  +
 I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I
AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT   AT  +
 I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I    I
RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL   RL  +
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VM = Video Modules
AT = Action Tools (study/ application guides)
RL = Resource Links (menus of related off-site content)

X Axis = Framing Argument (increasing complexity)
Y Axis = Application (increasing specificity)
Z Axis = User-Generated Comment and Content (increasing participation)
(The z axis can be thought of as projecting behind and before each cell of the grid.)

This content node is projected to contain 15, free-standing, 5-minute video modules, with two action tools (study/ application guides) related to each, as well as two menus of links to more in-depth, external resources, all of which will be keyword searchable. These 75 content units will be arrayed in a three dimensional virtual matrix whose x axis consists of video modules developing the framing concept; its y axis comprises study/ action guides which apply the modules in greater specificity and depth, while its z axis accretes user generated commentary and content around each of the grid's 75 cells.

The online platform for this resource-bank will be equipped with an editing tool which enables users to assemble the units in any permutation and thereby customize the content to specific audiences and objectives. (One permutation will even constitute a relatively conventional 50 minute documentary.) The platform will deliver this content so it is indistinguishable from the stakeholder's own site interface, strengthening that organization and participating integrally in the work of social change. In contrast to most film-related sites, the American Birthright site aims to be as invisible as possible. Finally, unlike linear film with its Aristotelian beginning, middle and end, a resource-bank is flexible, scalable and open-ended, adding new content as it becomes available or necessary along any of its three axes.

Newsreel also surveyed its racial justice sample population about the topics where they saw a need for new production. They received over four hundred suggestions 85% of which clustered

around eleven themes.[15] Since Newsreel had to aggregate these suggestions and define the eleven rubrics, it was necessary to confirm that these accurately reflected the intent of the respondents to the original survey, as well as rank them in order of priority. A second survey was therefore sent to respondents with one question: "If a new film were available on this topic would you *definitely* use it in your work?" Four topics emerged as production priorities for at least half the sample which strike me as a surprising degree of consensus; the remaining eleven were picked by between 3% to 26% of respondents, not statistically significant in such a small sample (251 respondents).

Table 7. Racial Justice New Production: Media You Would *Definitely* Use in Your Work

1. The Criminalization of Black Youth: The Cradle to Jail Pipeline – 59%
2. The Myth of the Post-Racial Society: Stereotyping the Present – 55%
3. Education Fifty Years after *Brown:* Theories, Practice and Lessons – 54%
4. The Role of Structural Racism in Increasing U.S. Economic Inequality – 48%

(514 responses; 273 respondents; sample = 311; test of 11 themes; 907 responses, 251 respondents; sample = 251)

A comparison of these four topics with the films Newsreel has previewed over the past three years is illustrative of the difference between the media priorities of producers and foundations and social justice stakeholders. For example, during this period Newsreel screened close to a dozen films on criminal justice; each focused on a serious miscarriage of justice or an exemplary judge or attorney but none examining the role of incarceration as an instrument of social control over the pressures produced by racial disparities. It received a like number of titles on African American education, usually celebrating exceptionally motivated schools, principals, teachers or parents but neglecting the damaging effects of under-funding, poverty and racial stereotyping on the educational outcomes of the majority of black students. Most of the titles Newsreel previewed were on black history, as are, not coincidentally, most of the films in their African American Perspectives collection. Yet, only one history topic made it into the top eleven production priorities and even that was tied to present-day organizing. This comparative lack of interest could reflect the many distinguished films on black history already in distribution or educators' and activists' belief that films on current issues are more urgently needed.

The fourth topic makes explicit what is implicit in the first three: the critical role of the economy in perpetuating, structuring and articulating racial inequity. Over the past three years, Newsreel previewed *no* films which directly addressed this issue — and this during a period of economic crisis and hardship unparalleled for 50 years. I know many of my filmmaker and film critic friends would argue that the economy is "un-filmic" because it lurks behind the visible surface of social problems. But, if it is the "invisible hand" pulling the strings, isn't it all the more urgent that it be exposed? If documentary, as we think of it, can't address the most powerful force shaping our

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[15] The topics endorsed by under roughly 48% of the votes were: "Environmental Racism," "The Black Middle Class: Change and Continuity," "New Directions for African American Politics in the 21st Century," "Digital Divide or Community Catalyst," "Talking about Race: Strategies for Community and Campus Dialogue," "Serving Today's African American Student," "Black and Brown: Trans-Racial Conflicts and Coalitions," and "The Civil Rights Movement: Lessons for Today's Activists."

society, head-on and without circumlocution, perhaps we need to rethink documentary rather than renounce the economy.

Newsreel's racial justice needs assessment could have impact beyond Newsreel's modest production and acquisition capacity. I have forwarded these results to the small circle of funders of African American documentaries and encouraged them not to rely on Newsreel's primitive data-collection techniques but to undertake their own better-funded, more professional research into the media needs of their racial justice stakeholders. They can then decide how much of their media budgets they wish to make accountable to those needs. This seems a more responsible, responsive and pro-active approach than the hit-or-miss, open-call process adopted by JustFilms.

V. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper's call for increased accountability in social justice media funding and production reflects a wider recognition that non-profit practices can no longer be exempt from demonstrating their comparative effectiveness in meeting stakeholders' needs, when placed beside alternative uses for the same funds. This would appear to be a sine qua non for accountable social issue media and philanthropy. As a society, we take it for granted (perhaps too much so) that untested, expensive, potentially useless drugs should not be foisted on an unwitting public. It follows a fortiori that untested, expensive, potentially useless social issue documentaries also prove they are more than philanthropic quackery and filmmaker snake oil. Rigorous measurement of objectives and outcomes are doubly important during this period of rapid technological change when, in the absence or reliable data, "new media" hucksters prey on the credulity of filmmakers and funders.

1. The Technological Imperative. Serious investigation of these issues has been obfuscated by the boosterism of avatars of a "digital democracy" and "information commons." If we listen carefully, we will hear the same pat assurances and "blue skies" promises as their predecessors, the proselytes of radio, television, cable and home video. These digirati dislodge technology from the larger social apparatus of commodity exchange and thereby fail to acknowledge that any technology will inevitably reflect, reinforce and reproduce the values and relative power of the social forces deploying it. Prophets of "technological inevitability," a literal *deus ex machina,* deflect activists, wittingly or not, from the fundamentally *political* and prior task of creating, populating and shaping the on- *and* off-line spaces and communities where social justice media alone can have an impact.

Philanthropies have succumbed to this technological hoax, quixotically funding far-fetched, new media schemes on the assumption that if it's there the public will come — another example of divorcing technology from its social context. A more prudent and responsible course would be to build-out and strengthen existing activist sites which have demonstrated publics using not the newest but most appropriate technology. Funders tend to suffer from a Genesis-complex, a fondness for their own creatures rather than supporting established media institutions. Therefore a valuable research topic might be the return on "greenfield" versus "brownfield" media investments.

It hardly takes a think tank to realize that much of the activist media of the future will be delivered over digital platforms; the challenge is not to fetishize it. Media activists need to inoculate themselves against that most prevalent and pernicious online virus, the "technological imperative," the compulsion to embrace every new technology uncritically, merely because it

exists. We know that consumer capitalism continually manufactures needs and desires so it then can fill them; why assume that online industries are any different? They market a dizzying array of online choices — all except the choice not to consume them, to go off-line. In this respect, the internet lives up to its name, a net captivating its users in more ways than one. New media gizmos are not ipso facto an improvement over the oft-derided "legacy technologies" it crowds out. Therefore it is not enough to research the effectiveness of new media without also assaying its comparative effectiveness across the full media spectrum. Rather than touting the social potential of digital media (as contrasted with its real-world use), we should be teaching people to think more critically about when they go online and what they do there.

I've heard many people say: but look at what Facebook did in Egypt. A more correct response would be: look what Egypt did with Facebook. It demonstrated, if nothing else, that context shapes the platform not the reverse and that the larger social context determines the online context. All tweets are *not* equal and the media is *not* the message. In America's online culture, most social media debases the meaning of social as much as Facebook degrades friend. Our consumer culture of distraction instantly disperses and dissipates dissenting ideas in the cacophony of cyberspace before they can coalesce into concerted, committed activism.[16] We need to research the role of context in the uniformly nugatory results of mass media social justice strategies — television, movies, home DVD and now social media.

2. A Dearth of Disinterested Data. The enormous financial and ideological investment in the "transformative" power of the internet makes it exceptionally difficult to obtain reliable data on its actual use and impact in social justice organizing. One possible reason is that evaluation of such projects are usually written by their producer, outreach coordinator or a consultant hired by the program officer funding them, all of whom have a clear vested interest in its success.[17]

Over the past half century, audience reception theorists such as Stuart Hall and David Morley, to say nothing of commercial polling firms like Nielsen and Arbitron, have developed nuanced tools for such analyses. These, of course, need to be adapted to the distinct goals of social justice organizing and education lest they import and impose inappropriate, market-oriented metrics on activist media practice. But there should be no principled objection to double-blind, quantitative studies since the relevant *political* question is not measurement but what is measured. Here a project's stakeholders, not filmmakers or philanthropists, should clearly define their desired outcomes *before* a production is conceived or launched.

My enthusiasm for quantitative metrics does not blind me to their limitations, for example, privileging inputs and outcomes which can be easily and accurately measured. Systemic social change involves more than voting for a particular candidate or sitting through a television show

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[16] We should resist that comforting but complacent populism which celebrates the handicrafts of "digital natives," a cargo cult of user-generated (or user-pirated) content. The remix reflex, tweaked twittering, compulsive posting, the notoriously shrinking American attention span are all symptomatic of a generation bombarded from birth by an unremitting stream of commercial "messaging." The information glut (TMI) suggests another research topic: is there an inverse relationship between the quantity and quality of content created and consumed by a society?

[17] An analogous dynamic resulted in the 2008 financial crisis when bond-rating agencies paid by mortgage bankers colluded to cover-up their own "sub-prime" investments. Over-reporting of "positive" results and the subsequent "Decline Effect" are well-documented in statistical literature, resulting from researchers and their backers precipitously publicizing data substantiating their claims. Similarly, much social media research sounds more like giddy cheerleading than sober scholarship.

and applauding. It requires denaturalizing the invisible frames through which people see — and don't see — society and their role in it, the "deep grammar" of social life.[18] Such paradigmatic shifts won't show up in instant polling data but call for longitudinal studies not just of audience reception but also audience agency, shifts in attitudes and behaviors. Measurable outcomes *do* matter; they are a necessary but not sufficient condition for social justice media effectiveness. As a consequence, social issue films need to be held accountable to *more,* not less exacting standards than commercial media.

3. Accountable Design. Another issue calling out for further study is how to optimize stakeholder input into social issue media design and production. As a baseline, the actual influence scholars and community representatives exert in key production decisions should be measured. Such "advisory boards" have become ubiquitous and accepted as adequate guarantors that a film is informed by the interests and experiences of a broader community than its filmmaker and funders. There is anecdotal evidence that advisors often feel they function as "window dressing" and first see "their" film when it airs on television. It would not be beyond the resources of Ford or the NEH to engage an arms-length evaluator to track the impact of these advisors through the conception, scripting and editing of these films; widely used project management software leaves an indelible digital trail. Surveying advisors is neither adequate nor reliable since they are also implicated in any dereliction of oversight.

I am convinced it is as important to evaluate the effectiveness of Newsreel's stakeholder design prototype as the content resulting from it. Implementing this collaborative process has already raised a number of questions requiring further study: what is the optimal mix of scholars, organizational leaders and front-line film users? How can their input be maximized while minimizing demands on their scarce time? At what points is stakeholder input crucial? Does online communication allow a transparent, concise and effective information flow?

The development of evidence-based project design protocols and necessary survey instruments, far more sophisticated than Newsreel's primeval prototype, is a long-overdue reform in social justice media production. A variety of models will need to be tested across a significant body of productions to establish a reliable body of evidence-based best practices. As in other respects, JustFilms represents a missed opportunity to test these processes and harvest irreplaceable data. Sadly, after expending $50,000,000, the field and Ford will have no clearer idea about how to produce effective and accountable social justice media than it does today. Stakeholders will still be excluded from substantive participation in activist media design and production and the gap between producer and user, content and context, the burden of this report, will continue to widen.

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[18] The work of organizations like the Framework Institute has direct relevance to activist media practices. Their work on early childhood development was invaluable in Newsreel's testing of framing concepts for its American Birthright resource bank. As a "window on the world," films informed by such research can become a powerful tool for reframing the social landscape and their viewers place in it.