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Ian Inaba Interview

By Ross Lenihan

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Ross Lenihan (RL): You have become increasingly involved with short-format documentary work rather than feature-length work. Why the shift?

Ian Inaba (II): Over the last four years I've become more involved in short-format work for a couple of reasons. One is that the Internet is a very good medium to try to reach people, particularly with documentary film. People's attention spans are frankly shorter on the Web than they are in a movie theater or on television, and so it's often just more effective or efficient when transmitting a piece of information to people when you can tell it in a short format. That being said, there are a lot of subjects and a lot of stories that can't possibly be told as powerfully as they can in a full feature-length documentary. But because the work we do here at the Citizen Engagement Lab involves informing people and engaging them in ways that allow them to take action on information, short-format content or videos are a much better match in terms of pairing the content and the subject matter with an action that people can take.

RL: Is it safe to say that short formatting is not only important because of attention spans, but also because you're trying to get people to go outside their normal routines to get involved in a particular cause, and so there's a need to quickly and succinctly engage them with a topic?

II: I think so, particularly when you want to reach new people or you want things to spread early and very quickly. If you just look at the trending of information consumption, Twitter is a much shorter format than a blog post, things on Facebook tend to be fairly short in format, etc. For information in general, consumers are being exposed to pieces of content that are much shorter. People are reading less long articles and things like that.

RL: Does age play a role in all this?

II: You know people always bring up the idea, "Is age a factor here?" And actually I don't think that it is. I mean sure, the penetration rates of who's watching content online may be higher with younger folks than with older demographics. We see it all the time with our communities, where people tend to assume that the campaigns that we run involve younger people, but when we poll the members of our various communities they actually tend to be older, they tend to be in the 35-45 or even 55 range. So I think there are advantages to reaching young people through the new mediums, but older people can be reached as well.

RL: Moving on to something a bit more topical, President Obama has now been in office for over a year. [A recent article in Rolling Stone magazine](#) described how the apathy level of many of the progressive groups that helped get Obama into office has reached very high levels.¹

Have there been any changes to your own campaigns given this level of apathy?

II: I think the apathy is particularly focused on Obama and the administration. We are not necessarily seeing a lull in citizens' desire to get involved in causes. We actually see an increase as they become more frustrated with politicians and the political process. The problems that the Obama administration and his folks have had in keeping their volunteers engaged was naturally going to come. You simply don't have an election to rally people around, and a candidate who needs people to get out in the streets and get other people to vote. But if you look at the coalition of folks that put him into office, a number of those constituents, whether they're Latinos for immigration reform, the LGBT community for civil rights laws, all of those groups – young people looking for education and climate change reform – have things they want done, and they haven't seen movement on those causes. I'm not sure that that necessarily equates with them giving up or throwing in the towel. I think it's just less of an excitement for Obama and the political process.



RL: Would you say that that frustration has opened up possibilities for groups like the [Citizen Engagement Lab](#) as frustrated groups and citizens might be looking for non-orthodox solutions to their problems?²

II: What we're trying to do is meet people where they are with campaigns that speak to them, with the types of change that they're hoping to see, and to give them ways to be informed and take action, both individually and collectively, to accomplish the goals of the community. And I think that that approach will always be the case, no matter whether the more traditional political apparatus is at work here or not, and that's why story telling, particularly through digital media, is really important, because content can always engage people. People still watch TV or go to movies. Viewership of those mediums is not down because the political process is down. As long as you can create compelling content you can engage people, and if you can make them feel or become inspired by watching something, that's often a time in which you can engage them in the political process or social change process. And that's why that opportunity will always exist, despite the current state of American politics.

RL: I read [a quote in a blog](#) where you talked about how you go after people with targeted campaigns, and going where there is already tension surrounding an issue.

Do you view yourself and the digital work you do with the Citizen Engagement Lab, [Video The Vote](#), etc., as going to where there's already an energy for a cause, but not an effective infrastructure to hone and utilize that energy?

II: The model that we rely on or structure most of our campaigns on is a kind of new organizing model where we use technology to allow people to share with friends and family information that they learn, and to take action collectively. In this way you can quickly accumulate political power via a constituency that wants to see social or political change. This model has been used fairly successfully by groups like [MoveOn](#) and even the Obama campaign to mobilize the core progressive base, or what people sometimes refer to as the Baby Boomer generation – the white middle-class liberal movement. But there are a lot of communities that have not utilized or benefited from that model yet. And so what we want to do is provide those tools, those tactics, and those campaign strategies to groups or organizers that are looking at a particular issue or identity-based campaign. I think there is a lot of energy out there. There are a lot of groups that want climate change legislation or immigration reform or LGBT rights or changes to our agricultural policies and all of those groups have stakeholders out there that have that energy, where they want to take action, but if there's no place for them to take that action, no vehicle ready to capitalize on these organizing moments, whether it's a news event or a piece of legislation, then that moment passes and they go back to their immediate, everyday lives. But if that vehicle is in place and there is a campaign or an effort that they can plug into, then you can capitalize on that energy and really make it grow.

RL: Related to that is a point that MIT professor Noam Chomsky brings up.³

Chomsky says that people organizing campaigns in foreign countries, particularly in Latin America, typically don't ask, "What can I do? What can I get involved in?" They simply have more of a pro-active approach and don't wait for some structure or group to come in and fill the gap when certain communities are looking for change. Would you say that there is less of a pro-active approach with people in the U.S., and that you have to go to them to get their help in a cause? Or is that not true?

II: I think it's somewhere in between. There are always certain people in every political movement or sector that are organizers by nature, or what we call "super" volunteers, that know a particular issue space or are particularly passionate about some issue, and they

are kind of self-motivated to figure out what they can do and to plug into that. Most of the general public doesn't fall into that segment, and those people do need to be presented an opportunity, an easy way to plug in, because they do often times care about those same issues, but not above the threshold where they'll be self-motivated. And that's partly because people are fairly busy in this country. People have long-hour jobs, people are students at school... Again, you have to find ways you make it easy for people to take that first action and from there you can kind of progressively get them to go deeper with their engagement. So whether that first action is signing a petition or maybe showing up at a meeting, from there you can kind of get them to engage further.

RL: Returning to the issue of identity politics, the work Citizen Engagement Lab does is based on the idea of taking on issues in terms of individual group identity. Do you feel identity politics as a methodological approach is a bigger factor today than it has been in past political movements, or has it just manifested itself differently because of the technology that's now available?

II: I think identity politics is actually quite similar now when compared to, say, the Civil Rights movement.

What you see now is that you can, in some cases, more quickly and more easily identify and reach people that might not be geographically localized; and the Internet and technology really allows for that. So you can find all the people that care about voting rights or care about organic food or any other issues, you can find them through the Internet even if they aren't local or in the same town as you. And that's given people a way to connect around issues or identities more easily than in the past. But what I think is important to remember is that at times people think that's all that's necessary – to find people who really care about your issue and can go out there and fight your battles. But the lesson from the Civil Rights movement that often doesn't get remembered here is that that movement really took allies in order to accomplish its goals. People sometimes now don't do the work or realize how much they need other allies that may not necessarily be so hardcore about a particular issue in order to achieve larger-scale social change. That's something that often takes the form of relationships and not necessarily content or organizing by technology.

RL: How do you define New Media?

II: New Media means content that's produced to be distributed in digital forms. And so that means it can be anything from an email to a viral video to a text message.



The ability to spread that information or to communicate it from one person to another or to many people easily makes it into this mass communication network that wasn't really possible before the Internet or before new communications technologies.

RL: How do you feel the "real time" impulse of New Media has affected documentary film work?

II: It's interesting because the Internet and New Media has, and continues to, drastically affect need and the ability to distribute documentary films. Before the Internet, there was this great need for documentary films because information distribution was really limited to traditional news outlets, and traditional news outlets, many documentary filmmakers thought, didn't carry all of the amazing human stories that could relate a social or political phenomenon in a way that a filmmaker often could. When the Internet happened, it opened up the distribution so that documentaries could reach people much more effectively. Information could now spread much more

quickly and easily, and you could have short format pieces reach new audiences more effectively as well. So in one dynamic you have shorter format pieces being more effective at going across the breadth of the Internet than long format pieces, but at the same time what you also have is the Internet causing a crisis in the state of journalism, which is reducing the number of original reporters and the amount of reporting that's actually happening, which in turn increases the need for people to do original reporting and story-telling. So you find yourself in this weird mix right now, where some factors make it easier and better for people to grab information easily and get it out to the public or to try to get people to take action around a piece of information, but at the same time you have less people actually doing original reporting, and so there's a greater need for that as well.

It's going to be interesting to see how it all plays out: will citizens get more involved? You know the people making videos of their cats on YouTube or their babies and putting them online and getting millions of views. Can some of that energy be harnessed for telling stories that can inform the public and make them a more effective citizenry? That's still to be seen, and there's not really the kind of infrastructure or apparatus to harness some of that energy. But in terms of the use of that theoretical documentary or short-format video footage for campaign work or grass-roots efforts, the grass-roots is always mobilized by information and looking for that, so the ability for the Internet to spread things very quickly is important. Political or grass-roots movements need momentum, and now you can more quickly harness and build that energy for an effort that you couldn't before. If you had to go town-to-town or city-to-city, things took a lot longer, whereas now you can blast out your email address book or use Facebook and send information to all your members, friends, and family.

RL: It seems you've become more suited to an almost MTV-style of fast edits, quick sound bytes, and slick stylization with the short-format work your organization produces. That said, has the way you think about documentary changed at all because of new technologies? Or has this idea of stylistic evolution (or devolution) been overplayed?

II: I think maybe that has been overplayed a little bit. I think the best short-format pieces don't necessarily have a correlation with more edits-per-minute or anything like that. I think that the phenomenon you're speaking to was actually more a result of certain genres in film, particularly music videos or even fiction films – like [The Bourne Identity](#) or something like that – where it's edited to agitate and stimulate your brain in a particular way. That's kind of a trend on its own that in turn has affected people's styles of filmmaking, but shot selection and how you shoot things, pacing, tempo, sound bytes, etc., hasn't necessarily been altered in any irrevocable way. To the extent that you can tell a story in a three to five minute segment, particularly as budgets for documentary films have dried up from a number of foundations, you obviously need to be aware of how your style is perceived and how effective it is in a given context. Having said that, I don't feel many filmmakers have consciously altered their stylistics according to some perceived shift in audience literacy.

RL: [A recent Pew study](#) indicated that traditional news sources, and particularly television, are still the dominant source of original news content.⁴

At the same time, however, these traditional sources have downsized their staffs and are producing less original content. Do you feel that the work that you do with the Citizen Engagement Lab and with user-generated content can fill that void in story production? Or is your role different?

II: I think that filling the void left by the crumbling state of journalism is something that we can help, but it's not our main goal. However, providing citizens with the tools to inform each other and to report stories from their communities and elevate those stories to the level of national awareness is something that we hope to provide. Stories like the Jena Six that were happening in small communities and getting very little news coverage, that then through the help of one our communities, [Color of Change](#), can reach the front page of newspapers and be the top story on CNN. That's a way in which citizens getting involved and informing each other about important stories happening in their society can be done with the help of these kinds of tools and campaigns. Video the Vote is another example of everyday people wanting to make sure that election irregularities and problems with the voting system are documented and reported on.

And then if mainstream outlets have access, they can help tell those stories as well. So telling new stories is definitely part of the work that we do, but we're not set up as the alternative to mainstream journalism.

RL: So would you say that if you're not attempting to fill the void left by the crumbling journalism industry, then the work that you and your members do instead creates a noise factor that attracts the mainstream press?

II: I think that makes sense. What you see now is many media outlets have gone the way of opinion-based news. So you take the majors, say Fox and MSNBC, which are at somewhat opposite ends of the political spectrum, and ask how much original reporting is done there versus how much they are amplifying stories being originally covered by a newspaper outlet, by bloggers, by citizen journalists, and on and on.



That's up for debate. There always is a competition in terms of becoming the top of the new list, or the news outlet that people go to; there is a competition to try to get that news attention. And that's definitely something that our organization and our members at times help to do. But in terms of the core of original reporting, still very few institutions do that nuts and bolts work. There are bloggers out there that are kind of changing that world, and again, our community's ability to raise the profile of those citizen-journalist stories, whether it's a blogger or a documentary filmmaker, can help get stories into the mainstream news cycle. So in a sense it's about making it easy for the mainstream news outlets to take up stories that are produced outside of their systems, and bringing popularity or public attention to those stories is often what makes them safe or accessible to the mainstream press.

RL: Do you feel that there are still limits that exist with respect to what groups and socio-economic classes have access to, and can effectively utilize, new technologies?

II: There is definitely a gap with communities and populations and geographies that are connected by technology and are more savvy with it, or heavier users of it, and who are more likely to be exposed to the projects that we run with New Media or digital media. But I think the gap is closing. We've even seen it with Presente.org, with the Latino community.

presente.org

The gains that community has made in terms of broadband access and Internet access has almost caught up with other minority groups or demographics. So I think it will continue to equalize out as the technology becomes more pervasive, and I think that technology will indeed level the playing field even more in terms of giving people the access to information and the ability to organize for communities of interest.

RL: With Video the Vote, you have thousands of volunteers literally go out and become their own (to some degree) documentary filmmakers. What do you feel that's proven to you in terms of the ability of a citizen to become a documentarian?

II: There is tremendous potential to get citizens involved in picking up where the journalism apparatus is leaving off. Again, there are many people who donate their time to creating content on social networks, whether it's YouTube or Facebook or Flickr, but that's usually not directed at news gathering. So while one of the functions of Video the Vote is to help with the distribution and distillation of stories from content that's produced by our volunteers, I think the most important function that we play is actually in terms of providing people assignments, or directing them in terms of where to apply their efforts as citizen journalists.

I think that is what we have found is the key missing component. You know you can ask people to go cover an issue like climate change, as in "Hey, do you care about climate change? Go document something about climate change." But if you tell them specifically, "Hey, how about you take a picture of your garden every day for two years and see what days the flowers bloom each year." If you direct them in their assignments, you can get much more production out of them, and I think in that way you can get stories told that you

might not be able to otherwise.

RL: Given the topical issues addressed in your documentary film [American Blackout](#) or even in the [Good News Now \(GNN\) NewsVideos](#), do you feel documentary film functions as a form of cultural memory?

II: Documentaries very much serve as a form of cultural memory. I think that the ability of documentary films to take information and construct theories or analyses to connect them to human stories that can reach people in ways that purely informational or statistical-based reporting cannot are incredibly useful, and this lends itself to documentary becoming this repository that future generations will be able to look back on and understand what the most important issues of the time were. Good writing does the same thing. It's able to encapsulate stories and information and tell it in a way that's worth preserving. So the more that people can make and document for future generations the better.

RL: Not to mention that topical issues often extend beyond their original zeitgeist. So it's not just about when a work comes out, it's about a constant shaping and re-shaping that takes place afterwards.

II: That's right. I think that raising public awareness around a certain issue can have a real lasting impact. You saw the same thing with [American Blackout](#) around voting rights and how the news outlets now, compared to before the film, definitely focus more on voting problems before they call the races on Election Day, and are now focused on whether there are long lines or whether machines are down. These are stories that they weren't covering before 2006. The same thing happened around the issue of climate change. Before [An Inconvenient Truth](#), you didn't really have that cultural memory or awareness that is now very pervasive.

So documentary film has that ability to affect our collective social consciousness and to really affect everything going forward for future generations in terms of how we perceive things.

RL: Few feature-length documentary films, such as [An Inconvenient Truth](#) or [Michael Moore films](#), get serious news attention. Do you think that because the well-known, feature-length documentary film world is already such a difficult playing field to get into, that the short-format, web-based documentary work you focus on really works to your advantage?

II: Well there are different formats that work better for different purposes. Short format pieces on the Web can be very effective at informing quickly, going viral, inspiring people, and getting them to take action. But what we tend to call "documentary films," that is, longer-format feature-length films, really have the ability to capture someone's imagination and to go deeper into people's understanding of an issue or phenomenon. Those films have the ability to really be culturally resonant and to become a part of that cultural memory. I'm not sure that short format pieces, while they can be more easily rallied around or used more tactically from a political campaign kind of perspective, have the chance to cause the kinds of cultural shifts that the longer format pieces have the potential to do.

RL: There are certain modern documentary films, such as Robert Greenwald's [Rethink Afghanistan](#), that are being released in pieces or segments online, which allows for viewers to comment on, shape, or participate in a film's making in unique ways before any final product is released. What do you think that process does to a documentary film?

II: Greenwald is one example, and [9500 Liberty](#) is another. That process scares me a little bit. The thought of producing content and rolling it out and trying to bring it all back together for a large story seems exciting, but it also seems like you're allowing a lot of cooks in the kitchen. People can then ask you questions or give you directions that could disrupt the process or even do something else. The interesting thing with [9500 Liberty](#) was that it became clear through this participatory process that the filmmakers were part of the process, and they became engaged with some of the subjects and thus became a part of the story line.

Some people, that is, the purists in documentary filmmaking, would say they've broken their objective lens or barrier, and become engaged with the subject matter or subjects. For people on the activist side, they might say the film became more powerful because the filmmakers could release more content about these local immigration hearings in Virginia, inspire community debate in a more timely manner, and fight against the anti-immigrant sentiment and help that community in the process of making a film. So I think it's just dependent on what people's agendas are. Filmmakers like Robert Greenwald as well as the [9500 Liberty](#) filmmakers have a purpose behind why they're making those films. They have a stated goal that they're trying to accomplish. And that's usually not a traditional documentary mindset. I haven't really seen a traditional documentarian open up that process and allow the audience in purely from an objective, observer standpoint, so I'd be curious to see how that would work.

RL: With [American Blackout](#) you discussed voter disenfranchisement, particularly within the African American community, but that film was an appeal to the whole country to improve voting conditions and strengthen democracy. Do you similarly feel that documentary films about local subjects can appeal to, and have an impact on, a more global/foreign audience?

II: It's one thing to talk about things domestically here in the U.S. You could have that same argument about telling any story locally and expanding it either nationally or internationally. Usually, the best documentaries are human stories, and the human story is usually, by definition, going to be local in some way.

And so I think that is part of the magic or the core of what the potential of documentary film holds: that you can tell these personal or local stories and they can be very powerful and effective at effecting and inspiring people outside of that local community, or for people who don't know the subject. But by introducing their stories and explaining the complex issues or lives that they live, you can have that impact. American Blackout, for example, inspired Video the Vote, and Video the Vote has been kind of exported to other countries. I think politics and other issues that are very global in nature can definitely impact the world, and telling films that begin locally is a tremendously effective way to do that.

RL: Do you feel that documentary in particular has a kind of mode of speaking that is unique in its ability to bring up issues of interconnectedness and shared experience, which kind of form the backbone of what you just spoke about with respect to local human stories translating globally?

II: Actually I'm not so sure. I used to think that, but then I met someone who runs something called the Harmony Institute in New York, and he was telling me about an experiment that they conducted about the difference in impact between An Inconvenient Truth and The Day After Tomorrow because those films actually came out around the same time.

And they looked at people's consumer behavior both before and after they saw each of those movies, and he asked me, "Well, which film had a bigger impact on people in terms of awareness and concern for global warming – was it a narrative format or a documentary format?" And it actually turned out that it was the narrative format. The Day After Tomorrow, with this post-apocalyptic aftermath of where global warming could lead, caused more people to change their light bulbs and buy Priuses, and so I don't think that documentaries have a lock on the ability of films to influence the world or tell stories or let people connect with characters in a way that can impact their lives.

In fact, I think fiction is probably more potent sometimes in doing that just because of the fantasy aspect of it, and the ability to write story lines by very good screenwriters that people can identify with or feel a little bit closer to, than, say, a documentary subject. So I think that documentary is this magic thing on its own, because it's hard, probably harder in a different way, to make a documentary film that can have an impact on people than it is to make a narrative film that does the same thing. But they're different in the ways that impact or connect with folks, and it's important to keep that difference in mind when thinking about these issues.

RL: That seems to strike a chord with the recent success of James Cameron's Avatar. I wondered if that detachment factor you spoke to is actually the most effective aspect of these blockbuster fiction films, because people don't feel like they're being bombarded with a moral, that they're being told how to feel about an issue; rather, they're experiencing a fictional world that allows for a space of recognition that maybe you can't get to with a documentary.

II: I think that's right. Documentaries speak more to intellectuals or people who are hungry for information beyond the traditional or mainstream news, while narrative films really have this ability to move people that might otherwise be put off by such blatant informational delivery. And so I think each mode affects society in different ways. Perhaps documentary speaks more to intellectual elites or the press media and certain segments of the population, while mainstream narratives have the ability to culturally influence wider populations.

RL: That said, does documentary require a certain kind of literacy that a fiction film does not?

II: To some extent, yes. You have to realize that many viewers just want to see what every movie critic is talking about or what their neighbors are talking about. So they'll find their way into Avatar or The Day After Tomorrow or whatever it might be, and perhaps come out with a social message. So I think that yes, those films have a lower threshold of commitment in terms of viewers opening themselves up to social messaging, while with documentary films it's almost a given that you're going to be exposing yourself to something social or political in terms of the messaging.

NOTES

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Author bio:

Ian Inaba is an award-winning director and producer with broad experience in media, technology, and business strategy. His directorial credits include the Sundance award-winning American Blackout (2006) and the controversial 2004 video for Eminem's Mosh, which was nominated for MTV's

Breakthrough Music Video Award. He co-founded Video the Vote, GNN.tv, and, most recently, the Citizen Engagement Lab, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that seeks to inspire citizen engagement through digital media and technology. He has also served as a software executive for Check Point Software Technologies (NASDAQ: CHKP) and an investment banker for Robertson, Stephens and Company. Ian is a graduate of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and is a native of Berkeley, CA.



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