

Commentary

The Rise of Documentary Filmmaking in Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT

This commentary offers some lessons learned from recent attempts by the author to produce and fund documentary films in the university setting. The article pays particular attention to how crowdfunding can be utilized by first-time media producers.

Keywords *Documentary; Crowdfunding; Academic funding; Research-creation*

RÉSUMÉ

Ce commentaire propose quelques leçons apprises par l'auteur à la suite de tentatives récentes de réaliser et de financer des documentaires dans un milieu universitaire. L'article porte une attention particulière à la manière dont les néophytes en matière de production audiovisuelle peuvent recourir au sociofinancement.

Mots clés *Documentaire; Sociofinancement; Financement académique; Recherche-cr ation*

Over the past couple of years, a number of faculty colleagues from Canadian communication programs have reached out to me to discuss the complexities involved in developing documentary film projects. None of these colleagues had any experience producing or directing media or film. Neither had I until, in 2008, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), through a research-creation program now defunct, funded my proposal for a feature documentary film entitled *Preempting Dissent* (Elmer & Opel, 2014).

A few of us assembled in Montr al to swap notes and discuss how faculty and graduate students could integrate media production, specifically documentary film production, into our respective research agendas. What follows are some of my contributions to that discussion, plus lessons learned through developing and especially funding my recent documentary feature film *The Canadian Delegation* (Elmer, 2018) in the university context.

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There is, of course, a long history and tradition of teaching and researching documentary film and media in communication studies.¹ But my points here are directed more at communication scholars with little to no background in video and film production, or even knowledge of documentary traditions in Canada or elsewhere. The spike in interest in documentary filmmaking from such non-practitioners in our discipline can be attributed to a number of interrelated factors. First, barriers to film production and dissemination have dramatically lessened over the past decade, in terms of both the cost of equipment and the technical requirements to operate cameras and especially editing software. Second, the media production interests and skill sets of communication undergraduate and graduate students have also dramatically increased. Media literacy curriculum at the secondary level has started to integrate media production skills developed on social media and internet platforms (Hutchinson, 2012). Media making has, in short, become commonplace and routine among university students. Third, increased requirements by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)² and other funding agencies to incorporate non-traditional forms of knowledge mobilization and research dissemination have opened the door for internet, Web, and other non-text-based media forms. These forms include short videos for social media platforms (Cooper, 2014); videotaped ethnographies and interviews (Hackett, Pool, Rowsell, & Aghajan, 2015); remix videos (Elmer, 2012); and documentaries (Petrarca & Hughes, 2014).

Arguably the most important shift toward incorporating film and video production in university research settings is the appearance of policy initiatives to develop practice-based research or “research-creation,” a well-known concept in communication studies (cf. Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012), spurred on in part by the ground-breaking report published by SSHRC (2008). The basis of SSHRC’s research-creation program was the recognition that some research questions could only be answered by engaging in an artistic process.

Following the logic of the research-creation program, I produced a feature documentary film, *Preempting Dissent* (Elmer & Opel, 2014), to better understanding the possibilities and limits of the creative commons licensing framework. As I have previously detailed (Elmer, 2012), although the requirement for scholarly and artistic output that accompanied such funding was perhaps unrealistic or at the very least intensely challenging, the demise of SSHRC’s research-creation funding program has left creative researchers wondering where their work now fits into Canada’s funding agencies. More established artists within and outside of the university have long benefited from—and contributed to—Canada’s arts councils and their array of funding programs. But for established university researchers, with more modest or nascent artistic resumes, arts councils provide very small budgets (and admittedly, in my case, consistent rejections).

A film producer and former PhD student of mine who helped complete *Preempting Dissent* took pity on me and offered some in-kind support to develop arts council proposals for my next documentary project. The process was, however, intensely awkward. I had been used to developing research proposals well before they could be properly enacted. Ironically, grant writing is an art form in itself, a form of acting. I am sure others have experienced that out-of-body experience too. But there

I was, in the laptop-filled café, answering personal questions from a grant writer. And this time there was no acting. In fact, quite the opposite. I was proposing a documentary film that followed the lives of a group of Canadian students flying to the other side of the world in the summer of 1989 to participate in the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students. The festival was a hold-over from the days of the Cold War, an “anti-imperialist” event that brought together leftist movements and some government representatives from the Soviet bloc and non-aligned nations.

Somehow, as I sat there squirming in my seat, trying to answer personal questions from the grant writer, my “acting” skills left me. Why had I chosen this topic? How did it resonate with my own life? How would I treat the subject matter artistically? I had absolutely no idea. And frankly, I did not particularly want to know. In a stubborn sense, I was tired of acting, of pretending that research could be a fully, completely, and, most importantly, convincingly prescribed endeavour. I knew some of the film’s subjects and their personal life trajectories. One had become a close friend and confidant, others were people with whom I had cut my political teeth in our student activist days. But I had not seen many of these people for decades; some, including the leader of the delegation to the festival, I had met only briefly at protests on the streets of Toronto.

All of this is to say that the story of the student and youth festival was defined by its time, at the end of the Cold War, and its location, the mysterious so-called Hermit Kingdom of North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK). To be sure, one could imagine, or better still mimic, the dominant storytelling tropes about the end of the Cold War or the DPRK’s rigid political culture or naïve subservience to a cult of personality. But those stories had already been told. I could see no “art” in those stories.

Back to the café. By now the tables were turned. The in-kind grant writer was squirming, partly because of too much coffee, but also because I had artfully dodged her personal questions about artistic visions for close to two hours. And after a drink, I had taken us to the real heart of the matter. Having grown somewhat weary of the grant game and its requirement for a suite of overpromises, I had come to the realization that I had to learn the art of the “pitch,” or as everyone says in the film industry, the “elevator pitch” (which of course recognizes that no funder, distributor, or broadcaster is willing to stand still to hear your ideas). I had no experience whatsoever in writing or otherwise delivering one-sentence abstracts for my past projects. I was also deeply suspicious about having to self-market myself in sound bites. Yet at the same time, I recognized that the 40-page overpromised, overprescribed grant proposal that had so complicated and ultimately compromised my last documentary feature film could not be replicated. I would need to learn how to ask for money. Or rather, I would need to develop a language for soliciting money, a pitch to financially support the documentary.

With only one feature film on my CV and an admittedly underdeveloped “artistic” pitch, I was hardly surprised to receive a rejection letter from the Toronto and Ontario art councils and the Canada Council for the Arts. With no core budget, I decided to fund one shoot at a time with the small grants available from my university and in-kind support from my producer. In retrospect, this was not a bad plan. How much could I mess up with \$2,500 increments trickling in every six months? Moreover, the

expanded production schedule meant that I could take it slow, learn as I went along, and ultimately develop an engaging story for the documentary.

With no substantial budget, I was also forced to find and recruit younger and less experienced collaborators. Many were students from media programs at my university, but there were also non-media majors who had developed their own DIY media projects, again enabled by the drastic drop in media equipment prices, the availability of equipment on my campus, and the accessibility of editing software, now bundled into the university's computer services for faculty, staff, and students. The "AV department" may still exist, but resources for making films—or simply videotaping lectures or visiting scholars for one's website or classroom—are increasingly accessible to all university members.

I also supplemented my decades-old training in video production with online video tutorials on YouTube, especially when I ran into trouble. And the local video collective delivered an exceptional one-day crash course in video editing. The course effectively saved my film, giving me enough software editing skills and confidence to manage and catalogue my files and then slowly assemble a very rough cut. But even with all these cost-saving tools and techniques, the film was still going to flounder without an experienced senior editor and funds for promotion.

After befriending a few filmmakers in my hometown, I learned that one had run a successful crowdfunding campaign, netting over \$20,000—enough funds for him to complete his documentary. The thought of having to hit up friends and family, however, just filled me with dread. I could not initially get past the idea that crowdfunding was the domain of failed projects. But after having attended Toronto's 'Hot Docs' documentary festival a few years running I soon realized that *everyone* ran crowdfunding campaigns—from the worst projects ever to some of the most successful and compelling documentary films I had ever seen. The 2018 award winner *My Enemy, My Brother* (Shin, 2017), for example, received funds and support from a long list of impressive funders, including Superchannel, the Canada Media Fund, Rogers Documentary Fund, the Ontario Media Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada, Bell Media, and Bravo Fact. And yet the director also ran a crowdfunding campaign, netting almost U.S.\$30,000 through the popular site Indiegogo (2015). Crowdfunding has, in short, become an essential funding source for the documentary film community.

A quick scan of online resources for starting and running crowdfunding campaigns returns one common and consistent message: it is hard work and not for the novice. With thousands upon thousands of projects listed on sites such as Indiegogo and Kickstarter, crowdfunding is deeply embedded in our dispersed and fleeting media "economy of attention." Many successful crowdfunding campaigns, and by extension documentary films, have "built in" or otherwise clearly identifiable or intended audiences. Much like the requirement to prove a compelling "impact" for your research on SSHRC grants, successful docs and campaigns are often framed as "impactful" media. Indeed, a nascent economy of foundations and support mechanisms has emerged to support impactful documentary filmmaking. The Bertha Foundation (2018), for example, provides filmmakers with support to develop political campaigns that align with the messages and issues discussed in their documentaries.

For my own film, *The Canadian Delegation* (Elmer, 2018), I hired a research assistant to help manage and update the campaign. We sketched out a four-week campaign (Indiegogo, 2016) that included promotional content at the launch and during the final week, following the advice of the Indiegogo platform reminding campaigners that the majority of donations are made during the first and last few days of a campaign. We chose to begin the campaign in mid-September, after people had returned from holidays and re-established their work and family routines. I based my financial expectations on the success of a colleague, who had recently run a crowdfunding campaign for a like-minded political film. He had set his goal at \$20,000 Canadian, and I followed suit (indicating suggested donations of \$10, \$30, \$50, \$100, \$250, or \$500). The funds from the campaign would in effect cover the remainder of my post-production costs and some promotion and festival costs as well.

By and large the crowdfunding site was easy to use and full of resources. The main requirements for the campaign webpage were photos and videos. Some campaigns I viewed for inspiration included video appeals from film directors. But I chose instead to include the two short trailers I had cut to promote the film. I had some expert help on one, so I thought it would impress, aesthetically, and also clearly communicate the story and nature of the doc to potential funders. I also included a number of on-set production photos, a none-too-subtle hint that in fact, yes, we had completed the production stage. Indiegogo provides a succinct template to follow for the overall pitch to funders. We established the launch date in two weeks to give us a bit more time to organize.

The campaign incorporated two basic dimensions: updating the site with content, and making direct and indirect appeals to donors. The content for the campaign page was greatly assisted by an interviewee in the film who lent me an impressive book of festival posters, providing the campaign with countless North Korean–designed posters from the event depicted in the film. We shared the most impressive posters on key days during the campaign: at the launch, in the middle of the four weeks when donations had slowed dramatically, and at the beginning of the final week. During the final two weeks we also posted short videos of key interviewees, which we titled “Meet the delegates.” The videos included outtakes and other noteworthy, typically funny, quotes from delegates. We included a short bio for each delegate and, in keeping with the social justice theme of the film, included a link to a charity or cause chosen by each profiled delegate. This tactic helped to activate the main supporters of the film, the interviewees themselves, who obliged by sharing their bio and video with friends and family.

Of course, the much more difficult part of the campaign was the fundraising, or rather the solicitation for funds. To lessen my own guilt and dread, I made a point of asking for either funds or support by way of retweets, reposts, likes, et cetera. The vast majority of campaign appeals were conducted via email, Facebook, and Twitter. The most crucial document was my email list. A couple weeks prior to launch, I downloaded every single email address from my email account, totalling over 1,400 addresses. There might have been an easier way, but, yes, after downloading the addresses into an Excel spreadsheet, I spent three full days manually editing the list. Apart from obviously deleting unknown and commercially related emails, I excluded emails from

my students and immediate work colleagues (especially since I was serving as interim chair of my department for the year). This still left an enormous number of people on the list who might not even recognize my name or vice versa. Ultimately, I chose to include email addresses of people who I simply would not be embarrassed to ask for money, an imperfect solution, but ultimately one that soothed my insecurities over the entire process. The process whittled the list down to a still impressive 800 unique names and addresses.

Since email is a personal medium, I decided to only send out three mass email bursts to the list: at the launch, at the halfway point, and with three days left in the campaign. I edited the list into three categories: expected, potential, and unexpected donors. The entire list received the first two email bursts. And then, with a few days left, I edited the expected and potential donors into a more realistic list that I used for the last email.

Indiegogo indicated in its support materials that almost half of all donations are channelled through Facebook. As a consequence, I established a film-only page on the platform. All content posted to Indiegogo was mirrored on my own Facebook page, the film page, and also my personal Twitter account. I typically reposted the daily content two to three times on Twitter, always with the Indiegogo donation link.

I found the first few days of the campaign to be emotionally exhausting. I have given many live interviews on television and otherwise publicized my work widely, but this was decidedly different. It felt like one huge peer review of my work, with cash the only feedback. But I was wrong. During the first week I achieved nearly a third of my funding goal. Moreover, I received countless emails of encouragement from good friends, long-lost friends and colleagues, and strangers. After the initial, painful launch period, I actually came to enjoy the process. While I still felt discomfort with the process of asking for money, I was rewarded with many wonderful personal exchanges on email, in person, and on the phone. In the end I estimate that I made well over 10,000 appeals for donations. I received only two negative comments.

It is difficult to identify any one or more of these elements as directly contributing to the success of the campaign. During the running of the campaign, however, the limits of mass appeals became obvious, especially after the initial launch and first few days. On a five-hour train trip to Montréal, I decided to shift gears and make direct—that is, *live*—appeals to my likely donors. This “green lit” strategy likely netted at least a third of my total donations. When I sent short appeals to friends who were live on Instant Messenger, the vast major responded instantly and delivered a donation. I replicated the tactic on Twitter. If I noticed someone was posting on Twitter, I immediately sent them a direct message. Again, very effective.

The campaign ended with a party at the local pub, where I thanked the donors, film interviewees, and production crew. In the end we had raised just over \$13,000 from 80 Indiegogo donors and another \$3,000 in direct donations, most in the days and weeks immediately after the official campaign. Although we did not reach our goal of \$20,000, the funds ultimately did pay for the completion of the film—effectively the editing and other key post-production costs. Since promotion costs and film festival fees were not immediately pending, I deferred those for another day.

To be sure, I am probably much more positive on the fundraising experience today than I was during the month-long crowdfunding campaign. Ultimately, it succeeded in filling in a sizable gap in my budget, while also serving as an exceptional audience engagement strategy. I have followed up with all donors, some with T-shirts and posters for thanks for their larger donations, but more generally with updates on the status of the film, including most recently its world premiere in Amsterdam and festival screenings in South Africa.

Looking forward, I have just started production on a new documentary as I continue to revise journal papers and complete a book-length manuscript. I have grown accustomed to balancing these two dimensions of my work, but funding issues persist. Having exhausted all my discretionary funds on *The Canadian Delegation*, though, I am now much further behind—financially speaking—as I begin my next film. Yet my own lessons learned have been legion, and moreover have laid the groundwork for more engaging funding proposals that assert the documentary project's contributions to the university and beyond—enhancing a broader set of skills for my students, enhancing student employment, bridging theory and practice, and, most importantly, developing new audiences for my own work and that of my artistic collaborators.

During the writing of this commentary and the preparation of another grant proposal, I was able to meet with representatives from SSHRC to discuss the future of their funding programs. A long and fruitful discussion ensued on the place of research-creation in SSHRC's current funding programs. It became clear that the ending of the stand-alone research-creation program was not an effort to end all support for creative research projects. Yet at the same time SSHRC's decision to accept research-creation projects in all of its programs remains murky, and moreover has added to the paperwork required in proposals. Although research-creation remains largely framed by SSHRC as a method of inquiry, again highlighting the making of art as crucial to answering research questions, proposal instructions still largely treat it as separate from more traditional social science and humanities research methods. And while my own work and proposals have increasingly called for video and documentary film to be used (in both short and long form) to engage collaborators, research partners, and other stakeholders, including the public (and SSHRC itself), the case for artistic research as a method of inquiry remains a work-in-progress. Given my own embracing of such an experimental, cautionary process in making documentary films, I am hopeful that such creative approaches to research will create more opportunities and engaging debates, and ultimately funds for artistic research projects such as documentary film.

Notes

1. Zoë Druick's (2007) work, in particular, has continued an important trajectory of documentary film studies in Canada.
2. In 2017 SSHRC explicitly encouraged researchers to partner with documentary filmmakers to disseminate their research via proposals to the Connections grant program (see SSHRC, 2017).

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