MAKING IT HAPPEN

Letter to a young filmmaker, from Magnus Isacsson.

Hi Elisabeth,

I'm sorry I had to run off the other day before we had time to finish our conversation. My kind of filmmaking is a little like being a doctor on call, when something important is happening in a story, we have to be off in a jiffy. That's why I have my own equipment and keep the batteries charged. (Thanks for the help loading the car.)

Anyway, here's what I meant to tell you.

The first thing is, this is only one take on how to approach documentary filmmaking, others would recommend a different course of action – probably more thoughtful than mine, since I have a tendency to jump into things without necessarily weighing all the pros and cons.

The most important, if you want to be a documentary filmmaker, is to have something to say, or a story to tell, and a real urge to do it. Because this is not an area of work you're going to enjoy if you're not strongly motivated: the conditions are too difficult, and the competition for limited resources too stiff. If you feel like working in the field but you don't have that drive for getting your own story or your own vision across, you might be better off working as a cinematographer, a sound recordist or an editor. These are all important and very creative jobs, all very challenging and indispensable to good filmmaking.

If you do want to make your own films, my sense of things is that while it's important to study (whether in a formal framework or not) the most important is to get experience. "C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron" goes a French saying. Getting experience by doing things is also a way to create a track record, and in this business, while a diploma assures potential employers that you are not completely ignorant, what counts is what you have actually done. (This being said, one should not underestimate the value of good schooling – the cinematographers I work with who were trained in Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union have a much more solid background than professionals from here – and not just in camerawork, they also studied the history of cinema and art, the physical nature of light, you name it….)

Getting experience doesn't necessarily mean directing your own film right away. It means doing things, hands on, which will help hone your skills and test your instincts. It could be

writing for the student newspaper or doing stories for the community radio, making an activist video or even just a home movie. I saw a terrific film the other day, “Mohawk Girls,” about growing up on a native reserve, directed by Tracy Deere. She incorporated excerpts from her own home videos – it was obvious she had been at it for years, learning as she went, and creating precious archives in the process.

But the time will come when you have your own project you want to direct – and perhaps shoot, or do sound for as well. You will then face the often daunting prospect of funding the film, getting all the resources together, generating the institutional support, which you often can’t get without having a broadcaster or at least a producer. All these broadcasters and institutions have seemingly complicated rules and requirements, it’s a bit like a jungle. So where do you start ?

Well, I would say (others would disagree) that you should not start by trying to learn all the ropes, to become your own producer and learn to deal with all the institutions and their arcane requirements. When I left my job as a TV producer to become an independent filmmaker twenty years ago, I met many inspiring producer/directors, people like Peter Raymont, Brry Greenwald, Sophie Bisonnette and Sylvie van Brabant, but I didn’t want to produce. I was more interested in learning doing my own research and writing, and learning technical skills, in addition to directing. And I’m glad I went that way, because producing has become even more difficult than it was back then. Most productions now involve a multitude of sources of funding, all with their ever more complex requirements. For most cases, I would suggest you focus your own energies on making sure that you have a good project, and then find someone to help you produce it. (More about this further down.)

Making sure you have a good project can be easier said than done. And how do you know that you have a good project, if it’s your first one ?

Here’s a rule of thumb. (Rules, of course, are there to be broken, when you have a good reason.) For your project to be worthwhile, and “fundable,” you generally need five things:

- **a good “story.”** (in the broad sense, a story to tell, a particular universe to discover and reveal, an analysis to test and share, a quest - your own or that of the characters involved.)
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- **important issues**: the film will not just be for you, it needs to be relevant to others.
- This doesn’t mean you necessarily have to embrace some big political issue the way Michael Moore does in his films. It can be a story about coming of age, about sexual

orientation, about relationships, whatever …but it has to have something universal about it. As we know from fiction, the universal is often found in the specific story rather than in generalities and abstractions.

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- **a point of view**: knowing what you want to say. By this I don't mean an editorial position, but your own vision, your take on the subject-matter at hand, or your own specific way of discovering and sharing your point of view with the audience. My friend Mark Achbar, one of Canada' most successful documentary filmmakers (co-producer and co-director of Mnufacturing Consent and The Corporation) , has this to say: "Not everything must be predetermined, and if you are open to learning as you go through the filmmaking process, even to the point of changing your mind entirely about the subject, you will probably end up with a more interesting film and feel more satisfied about what you've been through."

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- **good characters.** Unless you're setting out to make an essay film à la Chris Marker (a French filmmaker known for his very philosophical and reflective films) your film will feature real-life characters, and the film will be very much dependent on their strengths. A good character has to have more than just good ideas. You could never evaluate the qualities of a good character just based on a transcript of what s/he says, because one of the key elements of character is screen presence, if not charisma. And don't forget, most of the time you don't just want a talking head, but rather people who's actions will help drive the film.

- **Emotion and drama**. Films can give information, they can be full of ideas, they can have a thesis, they can even put forth solutions, but in the end they are movies and they have to work as a movie. Therefore, you need to make sure that there is the kind of drama and emotion in the film that will draw people in and allow them to really engage with your material.

If one of the five is missing, fine – if there is a good reason. You might even be doing something really original.

At this point, I could get into some very essential aspects of filmmaking, the style, the aesthetics, the production values, and the technical qualities. But I'm going to leave those aside

this time, just to keep my focus on how you get a project off the ground. At the end of the letter I'll list a few useful books dealing with those aspects.

Once the nature of your project is reasonably clear in your head -not necessarily all figured out, obviously, but once you know in which direction you're headed, it's time to find the right production framework. For that purpose, you need to find all the resources needed to make the film, and in order to do that you need to create a **momentum.** You need to give your subjects, and the people who will give you the resources the feeling that your film has to be made, and that it will be made, because you are determined to make it. You need to make people feel that while, of course, you're still a nice person (at least most of the time), respectful of others, saying no to you is not really an option. To quote Luc Jacquet, the director of March of the Penguins (the biggest grossing documentary ever in North America) "Even if you have no money, if you give energy to a film, it will eventually seduce a financial partner."

Momentum is important, even when you're no longer a beginner. When I rushed off to that shoot the other day, it was for a project which I don't have any funding for yet, a film about the Raging Grannies. The Grannies are a wonderful movement of elderly ladies who dress up in flowery hats and sign satirical songs, taking on neo-liberal and conservative politicians in the name of peace, social justice and the environment. If I wanted to make my film the "normal" way, it would probably take me (and the producer, in this case Les Films de l'Isle) six to nine months to find some development money, another three to six months to do the research and writing, and then six months or a year to put together production funding – if the answere were favourable. And we would have to do all that based just on texts. My preference is to start making the film, while I look for the money. That way, I always have footage to show potential investors. The question is no longer "will this film be made ?," but rather "who is going to invest in this film." It's a way of setting the agenda, rather than letting others do it. My attitude is that it's not up to the broadcasters and funding agencies to decide if they are going to allow me to make my film. That's a decision I make, and then the rest will have to follow. I don't mean this to be a scheme that you can copy: I know I have a track record, and equipment, and friends who are professional technicians, so I can afford to do this. But I think you get my drift, about the momentum and the attitude.

With the new digital cameras and relatively low-cost editing systems, you can do a lot without a budget. Recently, I was asked by an environmental coalition to organize a competition for short films on climate change. We put out a call last September for short films, between 30 seconds and five minutes, dealing with this theme, and managed to involve many filmmaker organizations, professional associations and institutions, so that we were able to offer several

substantial awards. Guess how many films we received before our Nov. 14th deadline ? 130 ! The quality was uneven, but there were about 40 really good or excellent films which we selected for our public screenings. The vast majority of these were made without any funding. This just shows you what can be done to produce a demo for a film project.

One note of caution here. Be very careful not to go out and shoot huge amounts of material without having a good sense of what you're doing. And don't shoot huge amounts of visually decent material with bad camera mic sound. It's good to take initiatives and get things going, but even better if you think through what you're doing and make sure it meets certain quality standards. Otherwise you will pay for it with a huge postproduction headache.

Your written proposals and your ability to pitch the idea (a notion which I abhor but which has to be mentioned) are of course important here. It's essential to have a well-crafted one-page synopsis of the film – some people will not read whole projects, or will onlyu read them if the synopsis is good. And then there are the letters and recommendations, photographs and video of the subjects, preliminary shoots, demo reels …anything that will help you convince people that the film is happening and that they would rather be part of it than not. My first proposal for an independent film (on the radioactive pollution from Canada's uranium mines on native land) was completely illustrated with colour photos of all the characters and situations I meant to film, giving people a sense that it was all for real. The NFB took it on as an in-house production.

As your proposal begins to take shape, you may even want to consider talking to a distributor, publicity person, activist group or other potential end-users of your film before you fully conceive it. The reason you make a film, after all, is not so that you can watch it by yourself in your living room. You're making it for others. Usually, the most others you can get. The smarter you can be about designing your film so that it will work for your intended audience, the more successful film you will end up with. Katherine Dodds, who did the publicity and grassroots outreach for "The Corporation" was invited into the creative process by Mark Achbar at the very beginning of his 8 year long struggle to make that film.

Keep in mind that everything you do will reflect your approach to the project and send signals to the people you approach for support. When I get calls and messages from students or beginning filmmakers I pretty much know right away who is serious and who would be a good person to work with, because their requests are clear and well-formulated and they show good judgement. On the other hand, sloppy writing, mistaken addresses, forgotten appointments and repeated lateness would put you in my "cat ate my computer cord" category of disorganized

students. People who work in production are used to a certain protocol of responsible and respectful behavior, not the least when equipment is involved – you don't want to lend an light and get it back with screws missing, or find that your precious radio mic doesn't have all its wind shields and little lapel clips when you need them.

You will also need **the skills – and sometimes the track record - of a producer**. That producer can be you, or someone else, or a team. The producer function involves finding the funds and other resources needed to make the film; being responsible for all the legal and contractual arrangements with broadcasters, institutions, crew and participants, and it entails an overall responsibility for flow of the production process and the quality of the result.

What kind of specific production arrangement you need depends totally on the nature of your film. Making a 15-minute video to raise funds for your local food bank is not the same thing as shooting a one-hour film for the CBC about the war in Iraq. And there is every kind of situation in between.

To obtain the funding and resources you need, there are various ways to go. In a very general sense, the main dividing line is between bigger professional projects which are destined for television (and sometimes theatrical distribution) on the one hand, and the smaller, more personal or community oriented films on the other. But of course many of the best documentaries will be hybrids which resist classification.
For young filmmakers, living in Quebec is an advantage, because our provincial government has a strong policy of supporting the creative arts. If you're under 35 you can apply to the Jeunes Créateurs program at SODEC, which will fund both the development and the production of a film. Even if you're older, SODEC can fund research and scriptwring for filmmakers who don't have broadcaster – since I saw you, I learned they will invest in my Raging Grannies film. Sadly, not to say shamefully, Ontario no longer has the OFDC, which used to support filmmakets like Barry Grenenwald, Ron Mann, Janis Cole and Holly Dale. As far as I know, other provinces also have weaker programs than Quebec, but you should check what's available where you live.

One route of course is to take your film to a producer at the NFB in the hopes that they will take it on as one of their films. The NFB has policies supporting the development of new talent, with particular emphasis on visible minorities and Native communities.

To simplify, let's talk about three kinds of productions

A**) A student film, a low-budget personal film, or a community video.**

For this kind of film, you will probably not have a broadcast license, and you will likely not be approaching the "big" institutions like Telefilm and the Cable Fund. (Should this be the Canadian Television Fund ?) You might be obtaining equipment from your educational institution, from supportive people in the industry or from a local film and video coop. There may be family members, private individuals, community groups, or foundations who will support your undertaking. If the story originates in a particular community or is on a subject with its own network of people, organizations and foundations can sometimes be persuaded to make small grants. Betsy Carson, who co-produced all of Nettie Wild's films, points out that research about the subject will turn up many useful connections: "The value of good research can't be overstated," she says, " both for the depth of the film's vision, but also for the funding opportunities.Also, web sites are now often connected to short film projects, and the possibilities can be very rewarding if you're just starting out. New Media funds exist to help people whose work is destined for the internet." Also, you may be able to obtain support from the NFB's filmmaker assistance program or its web site Citizen Shift.

With this kind of production, it is quite feasible even for a beginner to be a producer. If you go that route, you will have to be a quick study, very organized, and put a lot of emphasis on your relationships with all the people involved. You need to put a lot of effort into the planning and execution of your project, making sure you don't spend (too much) more than you have, and that you don't leave a trail of people feeling that they were cheated or let down. If people do you a favor by working for free, for reduced rates or for deferred pay, you need to honor the commitments you made, thank people for their contribution, and give them proper credit. You need to make sure everything that is in your film is credible, supported by the evidence, and not slanderous. And of course you will be the only person responsible for the quality of the film, which is not always so easy when you're into it up to your ears and have been for several months or even years.

Mark Achbar has more advice to add here. "You are not the first person ever to make a film, and many of the procedures and paperwork that go into making a film are formulaic. You don't have to re-invent the wheel for every contract or release form you will need. And you should have contracts and release forms, even if your project is no-budget, no-broadcaster, so that

everyone is clear on what they're giving and what they're getting in return (even if only credit). Not everyone respects the words on the piece of paper they signed, but at least it's a basis for discussion if there are misunderstandings later on. Proper releases also ensure that if your film becomes more successful than you anticipated, you will be in the clear to maximize its distribution potential around the world. This is good practice for the day when you make a larger budget film. These documents exist and with only slight modification, can be made to apply to your project. It is time well invested to seek out a mentor or other source of these documents, on disc, so that can be easily modified. Other people have thoughtfully spent small fortunes on production managers and lawyers to draw them up—just so that you don't have to."

B) A creatively original film funded mainly by the Arts Councils.

If your film is original and has artistic merit in addition to the importance of its subject matter, you can apply for money from the provincial arts council, in our case the Conseil des Arts et Lettres du Québec, and from the Canada Council for the Arts. They will fund research and development, script writing, experimentation and production. You will find all the relevant information on their web sites. The numerous proposals they receive are adjudicated (?) by juries of your peers, which is an ideal system. It is important to realize that your project needs to have true artistic merit to obtain arts council funding– it is not enough to present a regular documentary project and stick on a few sentences full of buzzwords like "creative" and "original" to convince them.

If you are dealing only with arts council money, it is not difficult to produce a film like this on your own. If some cases you can combine those funds with monies from the Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund and tax credits (a percentage of the money you spend on wages, which will be reimbursed by the governments) to make a film without broadcaster involvement. Many excellent Quebec films have been made this way, by – among others - Sylvain l'Éspérance, Daniel Cross, Sylvie van Brabant. Examples from English Canada include The Drawing by Jason Buxton in Halifax, Watching the Movies byGail Singer- Toronto and Tunguska Project produced by Gisèle Gordon also in Toronto The CIFVF, which many of us are working to defend from impending cutbacks right now, requires that you work with a recognized producer and provide ample proof of the distribution potential and educational relevancy of the project. CIFVF funding and the tax credits require very serious accounting procedures. So at this point we are well on our way to the my third category

C) A larger-scale production involving broadcasters, Telefilm and the Cable fund.

With the exception of films produced in-house by the National Film Board, the broadcasters hold the key to the main funding stream for Canadian documentaries. With a television "license" (investment and broadcast agreement) you can access funds from major institutions like Telefilm Canada and the Cable Fund. And other sources can be combined with these, be it the NFB as a co-producer, or the CIFVF, or special funds like the Rogers Fund.

For an undertaking of this scope, I don't recommend that a beginning filmmaker try to be his or her own producer. In my case, after making some fifteen films, I still would not want to take that on… The tasks of the producer on this level are extremely complex and require very considerable knowledge not just about filmmaking styles and techniques, but about the broadcasters and funding institutions, their rules and regulations – which tend to change every year of course – as well as a host of legal and contractual matters. In addition, both broadcasters and funding agencies much prefer to deal with established production companies and experienced producers, whom they see (not always without reason) as guarantors of both a viable production process and a quality result.

For that reason, my advice here is not about how to become your own producer, but about how to find a good producer.

To have a producer is not, to my mind, some kind of necessary evil. A good producer is not an overbearing boss that you want to keep out of the creative process, or simply a cash cow, or someone who is there to remind you that you're running out of shooting or editing days. A good producer is potentially your best ally, someone who will not only find you the resources to make the film but also help provide the creative space and stimulation you need to do the best work you can. At a certain level of production, the producer-director relationship is quite key to the whole filmmaking process.

This is how I see it. You are the filmmaker, and you need to develop and refine your vision. Often you have to be prepared to defend it. The producer on the other hand has an overarching responsibility for the overall process and the quality of the finished film. You are the one whose vision will be up there on the screen, and you will be judged based on the film's creative strengths and weaknesses. But s/he is the one who answers to the broadcasters and agencies, and his or her credibility with those agencies is also at stake. These two imperatives can co-exist in a very dynamic and fruitful way. Personally, I welcome all suggestions and challenges from the producer, as long as he or she respects my vision and way of working. A good producer will not try to order you to replace a character or a shot, or tell you how to cut a scene.

But s/he has the perfect right to say: I feel this or that part of the film is not working, try to find a way to strengthen it. I don't think I would be living up to my part of the bargain if I didn't try to do respond to such a request.

So how do you find a producer who will respect you, and who will really work for your project ? I would say, start by seeing who does what. The producers and companies that make real *auteur* or point-of-view films are not that numerous. If you like what they do, that's a good starting point. You wouldn't take a personal/political film to a company that just provides assembly-line episodes for specialty channels, any more than you would take a social issue doc to a company that specializes in adventure films. And then, talk to other filmmakers, don't hesitate to call people whose films you admire (at a reasonable hour) to ask for advice. (I remember the day I called Maurice Bulbulian from my office at the CBC and said, "I'm a TV producer but I admire your films and I'd like to meet you." Or the first time I asked Martin Duckworth out for lunch and he said "I think I'd like something with tomatoes.")Talk to other people who have experience. Go to meetings and screenings where you can meet people in the business. DOC, the Documentery Organization of Canada, holds meetings and screenings in major cities across the country. If you can afford it, don't hesitate to do volunteer work, if you do a good job, it will soon lead to other opportunities. Over the years, I have hired many students who started as interns. And my friend Mila Aung-Thwin of says an apprenticeship can change your life: in his case, he has become a partner of his old mentor Daniel Cross, in the very dynamic Montreal production company Eyesteelfilms.

Whether you're working with a producer or not, you may find the opportunity to propose your film to a broadcaster. There again, you have to figure out who does what and who will be interested in what. Most broadcasters and programs have specific mandates, stylistic requirements and areas of focus. The CBC has recently created positions for regional reps who will help direct you to the right program. Michelle van Beusekom who holds this position for Quebec and Ontario has this to say: " I remember getting pitched a 13 part series on the mating habits of crocodiles in the everglades while I was at the Womens' Television Network. (WTN) It was a thorough proposal, nicely presented, Fed-Exed all the way from Vancouver and wildly off the mark in terms of what WTN programs. Sending a proposal to a commissioner for a genre they don't work with can create the unwanted perception that the persondoesn't know what they are doing. In the same
way that being familiar with a production company's body of work will impress
a prospective producer, knowing a broadcster's documentary strands,
programming approach and target demographic also creates the impression that
you are dealing with someone who understands the business."

The approach to broadcasters and producers brings up another more general point about your relationships with people whose support you seek. You need something I once heard referred to as “emotional intelligence.,” of EQ, which will often get you further than IQ. If you treat people respectfully, as intelligent professionals, they will usually respond in kind. Inside those intimidating and seemingly anonymous funding agencies and broadcasters, there are real human beings who care about what is going on in the world and who are often willing to support you if your case is well made. Being thoughtful and articulate will impress people more than pretentious bluster. In the end, it’s all about convincing people that you are very serious about what you have set out to do, that you will do your absolute best, and that you definitely deserve a go at it.

If, somewhere along the way, you feel discouraged, go back to basics. Do you have a story to tell ? Is it somethnkg people should know about ? Is it important ? If it is, then you can do it.

Good luck !

Magnus Isacsson has made more than a dozen independent documentaries since he left his job as a television producer 20 years ago. Among his award-winning films are *Power*, *The Choir Boys*, and *Pressure Point*. He is presently working on *Doublethink*, a film about Orwell and Huxley in the 21st Century, and *Granny Power*, about the Raging Grannies.