



P.O.V. is not only a public television series—
it is a site of experiment for tomorrow's
public media.

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

P.O.V. Leaders on the Struggle to Create Truly Public Media

By Barbara Abrash

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INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the groundbreaking PBS documentary series *P.O.V.*, the Center for Social Media interviewed several of those who have led the project through its last two decades—Marc Weiss, Ellen Schneider, Cara Mertes, and Simon Kilmurry and Cynthia Lopez—on their goals, their challenges, and their vision for one of television's most productive sites for imagining and innovating the future of public media. These interviews reveal a project driven not only by social concern but by a passionate commitment to fostering public knowledge and action. As it evolved, *P.O.V.* leaders consistently sought out ways to involve viewers—as active commentators, as sources of new information, as mobilizers themselves of public knowledge and action.

The inspiration for *P.O.V.* came from the independent filmmakers deeply engaged with the feminist, civil rights, and anti-war social movements of the 1960s and '70s, who were transforming the voices, subjects, and uses of social issue documentary. By shifting the context for these films from the small screening rooms of the '70s to the living rooms of everyday Americans, *P.O.V.* redefined the publics for these works and generated unprecedented opportunities for discussion, engagement, and debate. Leaders of the series and the organizations it nurtured have developed multiple strategies for connecting individual narratives to larger social concerns. *P.O.V.* serves as a space for exploring the most vital documentary practices and ways in which media connect citizens to one another around shared problems in a pluralistic democracy.

P.O.V. has had relatively few leaders—a rarity in the nonprofit world—and several have maintained productive continuing relationships with the organization. Interviews with Marc Weiss, Ellen Schneider, Cara Mertes, Simon Kilmurry, and Cynthia Lopez revealed a strong shared sense of mission for public TV as a window into America's diversity, and as a laboratory for what media for public knowledge and action can be when not chained to a profit model.

They share a common vision that *P.O.V.* is not only a series of television programs but an entity that works consistently to change the media environment, both at the level of production (by sustaining filmmakers) and at the level of distribution (by engaging audiences and making them part of the ongoing life of the documentary).

BACKGROUND

P.O.V., now celebrating its 20th season on PBS, is a project of American Documentary, Inc., a multimedia company featuring nonfiction stories with socially relevant content as catalysts for public culture. The longest running independent documentary series on television, it has showcased over 250 films, in the process garnering 18 Emmys, 11 George Foster Peabody Awards, 8 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia Broadcast Journalism Awards, 3 Academy Awards, the Prix Italia, and the Webby Award, among others. In 2007, *P.O.V./American Documentary* received the National Academy of Television Arts and Science Special Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/WNET New York. Its production and educational outreach initiatives are supported by funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council for the Arts, the Ford Foundation, the Educational Foundation of America, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and public television viewers. The JPMorgan Chase Foundation is the official sponsor of *P.O.V.*'s 20th Anniversary Campaign.

***P.O.V.* is not only a public TV series of television programs but a site of experiment for tomorrow's public media.**

Originally a 10-week series, *P.O.V.* now presents a 16-week season, including two special broadcasts. Filmmakers receive license fees in the amount of \$525 per minute, or approximately \$30,000 per broadcast. The series is carried in the top

50 markets and reaches 97 percent of the American viewing public. It averages 1-1.2 million households per broadcast premiere. Through broadcast, online, community outreach, and communications and marketing efforts *P.O.V.* reaches over 20 million people.

To a mobilizing independent film community for whom media were a cornerstone of democratic life, public television—with its mission to provide a platform for unheard voices and underrepresented communities—was the logical, if reluctant, platform for documentary film. The late '60s and early '70s have been called a “golden age of documentary,” with independent filmmakers like Errol Morris, the Maysles brothers, and Emile de Antonio

bursting on the scene with original, sometimes scathing, and frankly personal views of social realities in America. Inspired by the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements, they believed in speaking truth to power. Their circuits of distribution were college campuses, community screenings, film festivals, and occasional local broadcast havens, like WNET's *Independent Focus*.

By the mid-'70s, independent filmmakers were lobbying Congress for support and creating organizations like the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF), New Day Films, and Women Make Movies to sustain their work and expand its circulation.

Independent nonfiction film was a growing presence in the '80s. Congress authorized funding for the Independent Television Service (ITVS), and filmmakers were receiving support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and many others. Mass media outlets, however, eluded them. While both the quality and quantity of documentary output were thriving, getting the work seen widely was difficult. Filmmakers found it complex and costly to navigate the public television bureaucracy. At the same time, public television was keen to avoid controversy, especially after the broadcast of the anti-redlining documentary *Banks and the Poor* (1970) drew the wrath of President Richard M. Nixon and growing threats to defund PBS. And audience-building was a challenge for films that varied in style, subject matter, and intention.

P.O.V. was conceived as an intermediary between controversy-averse public television and an outspoken independent film community pressing for access to broadcast. In the otherwise sleepy summer months of the 1988 television season, television critics greeted *P.O.V.*—the new PBS showcase of independent nonfiction social issue films—with enthusiasm for its fresh and provocative stories.

Marc Weiss (1987-1995) on the Origins of the Series

The series was the brainchild of media activist and independent producer, Marc Weiss, a veteran of the social movements that encouraged documentary to blossom as a social and political phenomenon. In interviews, Weiss described discovering the power of documentary as an anti-Vietnam war college student in the late '60s when he saw the raw, political films that radical collective Newsreel brought to campuses across the country.

As a producer, promoter, and programmer, Weiss recalled, he became part of a coalescing community of socially engaged filmmakers that included Barbara Kopple, Kartemquin Films, Julia Reichert, Jim Klein, and Pacific Street Films, among many others. Through the newly organized Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF), he developed conduits to international and U.S. film festivals and sought out other platforms for filmmakers that he called “the poets, the pamphleteers, and the prophets of our generation.” Through his work with festivals, and during a stint as guest curator for WNET’s *Independent Focus* (one of few television showcases for independent films), Weiss recalled, he was struck by the volume and originality of work that had so few outlets. He wanted to create a national showcase for nonfiction film and to establish a more trusting relationship between the independent filmmaking community and public television, by drawing on the creativity and energy of the independent community and advocates within public television.

Guided by veteran public broadcasting insiders—including *Frontline*’s David Fanning, Henry Becton of WGBH, PBS’s Barry Chase—and mentored by David M. Davis (see below), Weiss mobilized the support of a consortium of four PBS producing stations. These included WGBH Boston, Thirteen/WNET New York, KCET Los Angeles, and—crucially—South Carolina public television. “If we could convince South Carolina to get involved in the series,” Weiss recalled, “we had assurance for the stations in the South and Midwest that their interests would be protected, that this series wouldn’t create problems for them.”

This consortium joined the board of the newly formed American Documentary, Inc., the nonprofit umbrella organization of the series *P.O.V.* David M. Davis, a champion of independent media during his years at the Ford Foundation and then executive producer of the WNET-based PBS series *American Playhouse*, signed on as executive director, with

Weiss as executive producer. With this strong backing, *P.O.V.* won a trial 10-week series on the 1988 PBS summer schedule.

P.O.V. positioned itself, Weiss recalled, as an honest broker

between independent filmmakers and public broadcasting, whose past relationships had not been easy. Chronically under-funded filmmakers found little welcome at PBS or CPB; in turn

***P.O.V.* became an honest broker between independent filmmakers and public broadcasting.**

public TV programmers had no effective way to evaluate or program work that they tended to regard as problematic. Previous attempts to create documentary series had foundered for lack of focus and promotion.

It was critical, Weiss explained, to gain the confidence and support of both parties. So the series established a fair and orderly process for soliciting, selecting, and acquiring films. Following a pre-screening process, an Editorial Committee of filmmakers and station representatives—mirroring the process Weiss had created at *Independent Focus*—made recommendations to the executive producer. Weiss described the process of building relationships with the decision makers in what he regarded as *P.O.V.*'s four principal constituencies: independent filmmakers, public broadcasting stations, the press, and funders. In that first year, special attention was given to local station managers, who are the final arbiters of what is broadcast, and the press, which builds audiences and provides critical evaluation of the films that fuels discussion.

The first season was carefully planned to ensure that PBS would accept the series for broadcast. “It wasn’t a slam dunk,” Weiss recalled. “Dave [Davis] said to me, ‘Put a first season on the air that the stations are going to be able to live with, and if this first season is a success, you can go a little further later on. Don’t make big problems for everyone the first time out.’”

Prudence, however, did not necessarily translate into immediate sponsor support. The MacArthur Foundation provided a grant of \$200,000, but money was in such short supply in the first season that *P.O.V.* went on the air with one paid employee and seven interns. Land’s End, a company that had expressed interest in sponsoring the opening season, begged off after viewing *Rate It X*, Lucy Winer and Paula de Koenisberg’s feminist view of sexism in popular culture. The film, company spokespeople said, might offend some of their customers.

Weiss pointed out that *P.O.V.*'s signature style was set at the start, in order to establish the personal storytelling voice of the series. Each program declared authorship with a framing introduction from the filmmaker, and the season featured a diversity of makers and opinions, with a mix of experimental, cultural, and political work. By design, the series debuted in the slow summer season to appeal to television critics who were weary of reruns and hungry for good stories. A carefully planned campaign introduced the season line-up to members of the press, who welcomed the freshness and substance of a genre new to television.

Weiss recalled two major controversies in those early years. The series faced its first test in the second season with *Dark Circle*, an exposé of the environmental hazards of nuclear power at Rocky Flats, a weapons facility, and Diablo Canyon, a power facility. PBS had accepted the film for broadcast in 1982 but reneged even after the producers made changes to satisfy journalistic reporting standards.

Advocating for the selection of *Dark Circle* in the 1989 *P.O.V.* lineup, Weiss said at the time, “These independent films represent the perspective of the filmmaker or the subjects of the film in a way that says these voices need to be heard. Can’t we create a series that isn’t afraid of that, but celebrates it?”

In line with *P.O.V.*’s agreement to provide PBS with documentation for factual assertions, filmmakers Chris Beaver and Judy Irving delivered iron-clad sources for all facts in the film. (Indeed, shortly before broadcast, 75 FBI agents raided Rocky Flats, alleging that nuclear toxins had not been properly controlled and the facility had been poisoning the environment, and an investigation was launched.) Weiss, however, was careful to distinguish between the “balanced view” of journalism and personal documentaries, defining the series in the context of television broadcast. “*Dark Circle* was never meant to be journalism,” he said. “It comes out of a tradition of using personal stories to explore larger public issues.” Weiss thus prefigured debates now raging in the blogosphere about perspective and objectivity.

If *Dark Circle* had challenged PBS rules, the broadcast of Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1991) threatened to undo *P.O.V.* and throw public broadcasting into crisis. *Tongues Untied*, a poetic essay about the gay African-American experience, was originally intended for screening in the gay community. An eloquent evocation of a community that was then largely invisible to the general public, the film had gone on to win critical acclaim at international film festivals and had been shown on a few local PBS stations without controversy. Shortly before the *P.O.V.* broadcast, the press caught wind that the film had received a small amount of public funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Conservative groups led by Reverend Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association and Senator Jesse Helms seized on this news, decrying the use of tax dollars to support “the homosexual lifestyle” and calling on Congress to end PBS funding. Weiss and Ellen Schneider, who was then *P.O.V.*’s director of communications, both recalled their efforts to mount a strategic campaign to build press and opinion-leader support for the broadcast and to provide stations with

language to respond effectively to critics. Though several stations chose either not to broadcast *Tongues Untied*, or to program it late at night, many suffered attacks that some believed threatened their long-term existence.

While the series left long-lasting scars on some stations in conservative markets, Schneider now believes that the broadcast catalyzed a crucial debate on freedom of artistic and political expression and was a significant test of the role of public broadcasting in a democratic culture. Jennifer Lawson, executive vice president of national programming for PBS at the time, concurs: “The real story is with people in places like Georgia Public Television, where station manager Dick Ottinger and others showed real courage. They lost the battle, but principles were upheld.”

In the same season, *P.O.V.*'s scheduled broadcast of Robert Hilferty's *Stop the Church* (1990) created a firestorm. Part of a scheduled short-film program, the film documented a “die-in” staged by the AIDS activist group ACT-UP at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, to publicize what the group considered the Catholic Church's unacceptable response to the AIDS epidemic. *P.O.V.*'s Dave Davis and PBS vice president for scheduling and programming administration, John Grant, each pulled the film from the broadcast schedule, but for different reasons. Davis cited inadequate time to prepare vulnerable stations, especially after the stress of *Tongues Untied*, while Grant objected to the film's “pervasive tone of ridicule” Weiss agrees with Davis' view, that *P.O.V.* had neglected a responsibility to stations already in jeopardy. Ultimately, *Stop the Church* was broadcast with panel discussions by a few stations, including KCET Los Angeles and KQED San Francisco.

Ellen Schneider (1992–2006) and Engagement

Ellen Schneider's enthusiasm for documentary film began in her student days at Antioch College. In the '80s, her interests shifted from grassroots media to Hollywood-based independent feature film and original television movies, but with *Dark Circle* she found herself drawn anew to the drama and vitality of documentary films. A communications consultant in *P.O.V.*'s 1989 season, Schneider became *P.O.V.*'s director of communications in 1990, and co-executive producer in 1991–92. She left to join the ITVS start-up team for a year and then, during Marc Weiss's parental leave from the series, she assumed the role of executive producer in the 1993 season and again became co-executive producer with Weiss in 1994.

Weiss had approached *P.O.V.* from the point of view of filmmakers; Schneider regarded herself a communications strategist. In her view, the challenge was not only to build audience, but to move viewers to action. One important goal was to develop sustainable models for linking social issue documentaries with community and national organizations. Her initiatives transformed traditional one-way broadcast outreach models by building engagement into film projects from an early stage and changing the relationship between documentaries and viewers.

Veterans of the '70s social movements prized documentary films for their ability to spark discussion and social action—the bedrock of democratic life. While television broadcast had extended the reach of social issue documentary far beyond its 16mm beginnings, the immediacy of post-screening discussion was lost. By 1993, the complementary talents of Weiss and Schneider, along with the emergence of digital media technologies, produced a confluence of opportunity that launched a new era of experiments in viewer engagement.

Over the next several years, *P.O.V.* became an incubator of models for strategic outreach, using broadcast as a springboard for discussion and developing multiple interactions with audiences. These pathbreaking initiatives—online and on the ground—were designed to frame civic discourse, nurture conversation across difference, and move audiences to action. They privileged the catalytic properties of documentary in a healthy democracy.

Schneider's goal was to transform independent documentary into a tool for stimulating civic discourse and engaging citizen activism around social issues. Her initiatives, which received significant support from the Ford and MacArthur Foundations, began with High Impact Television (HITV), which linked broadcast with a national network of nonprofit organizations. In 1995, she became executive director of American Documentary, Inc., with the goal of expanding the organization as a “laboratory for independent media in public life.” By 1996 several new projects were in development, including *Right Here, Right Now* (originally *ECU*), a proposed small-format video diary series which was intended as a sister series to *P.O.V.*, and the Television Race Initiative (TRI), which used several PBS films about race and identity to stimulate dialogue. TRI evolved into Active Voice, which was spun off as an independent organization in 2006.

Schneider recounted the inspiration for her approach in early grassroots initiatives like New Day Films, a self-distribution social documentary film collaborative founded in 1971, for which she briefly worked. “New Day had a new idea about the strategic uses

of documentary,” she recalled. “Public television increased the potential exponentially. The legitimacy of the broadcast environment gave access to a national audience and to activists who could use them.”

Schneider was especially inspired by the power of personal stories to draw viewers to serious issues. For her, Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin’s *Silverlake Life: The View from Here*, the lead show of the 1993 season, was a turning point. This video diary tracing the daily lives of two men living with AIDS was an intimate glimpse into the human experience of a then-taboo subject. “*Silverlake Life* changed my life,” she said. “It got me thinking in personal and professional ways about small-format video and first-person storytelling, and how to use the phenomenal power of a heart-stopping story as a resource.”

The *Silverlake Life* broadcast struck a nerve with audiences. As viewer responses poured in, Schneider introduced a new feature to the broadcast, *Talking Back*, which mirrored the intimacy of the film. Schneider remembered, “We invited video letters from viewers. We got a letter (this was before e-mail) from a woman who said, ‘I didn’t know that gay people loved each other.’ And how could she, given how mainstream media was depicting ‘gay lifestyles’? That’s what story does—it gives people the timeless ability to connect with issues on a fundamental level.”

Talking Back, which became a regular broadcast feature, moved to a new level in 1995 with Jane Gillooly’s film, *Leona’s Sister Gerri* (1995), the story of the photograph of a naked woman dead as the result of an abortion, and the moral complexities of its uses as an icon by pro-choice activists. The outpouring of viewer response was so great that *P.O.V.*, under Weiss’ direction, produced a special broadcast composed of video letters.

Foundations played a key role in *P.O.V.*’s early strategic engagement initiatives, starting with a \$26,000 Ford Foundation grant to support *P.O.V.*’s “Tune-In” campaign for *Silverlake Life*, which was designed to put a human face on the epidemic. Between 1993 and 2005, *P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc.*, received \$1.7 million in Ford Foundation grants. Inspired by the educational campaign that accompanied the landmark civil rights series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987), the foundation had come to regard documentary as an effective social tool as well as a form of artistic expression.

In line with this objective, the Ford Foundation seeded High Impact Television (HITV), a series of experiments (1993–1995) to harness broadcast as a tool for grassroots organizations.

The inspiration for the HITV model was Gini Reticker and Amber Hollibaugh's *The Heart of the Matter* (1994), the first film to look at the AIDS crisis as a women's issue. This early national campaign model was an important start, but evaluations revealed the need for more time and money. Schneider described a key innovation of HITV, the "inverted pyramid"—a strategy to mobilize national service organizations as ready-made conduits to their local chapters, which was inspired by *Silverlake Life*. "I rented a screening room at the Kennedy Center and invited leaders in the community, policy makers and people from national AIDS organizations," she explained. "I said, 'This film is going to be on TV. How can it enhance what you are doing?' They signed on nationally and took responsibility for introducing it to their constituents in their own language."

National organizations were brought together in "brain trusts," and provided with materials to share with their local members, who were encouraged to create events around the broadcast. The project generated considerable interest, but the experiment had flaws. According to the project evaluation, national organizations had not effectively mobilized their members; grassroots groups lacked time and resources to implement local activities; and their media skills were inadequate. The campaign was promising—it had called attention to a serious issue—but there was a need to develop tools for more sustainable engagement.

According to Schneider, lessons learned from the two films about AIDS were then applied to the Television Race Initiative (TRI), 1997–2000. This project was inspired by a group of filmmakers with individual projects on race relations in America, who wanted to tap into a national network in order to foster community dialogue around race. Their films included Macky Alston's *Family Name* (1998), Jennifer Fox's *American Love Story* (1999), Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight Los Angeles* (2001), and Emiko Omori's *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999). They were not all *P.O.V.* films, but all were scheduled for PBS broadcast.

The project, which was funded by the Ford and Irvine Foundations (with additional support from the Rockefeller and Surdna Foundations), built on the High Impact Television experience, bringing together thematically linked films and providing media training to participating organizations. Public television stations jumped deeper into the mix. Their participation was fortified when the MacArthur Foundation awarded \$40,000–\$50,000 annual grants for up to three years to participating stations to institutionalize this work. Over time, TRI aggregated more than a dozen films in projects that generated ongoing models of coalition building, station-community partnerships, and community dialogue on critical issues across boundaries of opinion.

TRI was an ambitious project that produced promising but mixed results, Schneider recalled. “What sounded so clear, so logical on paper, didn’t always work in real life,” she said. One major problem was the fact that this project focused on diversity was tied to a PBS broadcast lineup that was not sufficiently diverse. Another was the complexity of discussing racial issues. But at least, from Schneider’s perspective, stations had begun to connect in new ways, or strengthen their relationships with community organizations, and the project pioneered the model of diversified, sustainable community engagement initiatives. She now believes these early experiments incubated tools and techniques that have become standard components in the documentary filmmaker’s outreach toolkit and are now widely used in public broadcasting. In Schneider’s opinion, TRI was distinct from other significant outreach initiatives—the Public Television Outreach Alliance and Bill Moyers’s Public Affairs Television, for example—because of “their social justice framework and the use of previously unlinked independent documentaries.”

This phase of *P.O.V.*’s initiatives in community-based outreach culminated in the formation of Active Voice in 2001, as a separate project of American Documentary, Inc., headed by Schneider. Its mission was to work with groups to maximize the use of media for civic engagement and to build partnerships among content providers and communities. Active Voice became an independent organization in 2006, with MacArthur Foundation support of \$1 million over three years.

P.O.V. had come to function as a research and development arm for an expanded vision of public media, building audiences and weaving documentary into the fabric of education and public discussion. The partnerships the series producers developed with stations and nonprofit organizations, and the spaces and materials they created were essential elements in an emerging public service communication infrastructure. *P.O.V.* was not simply delivering social issue messages. It was working to strengthen the potential of public media.

Marc Weiss (1995–1998) and Digital Innovation

While strategic partnerships and models for civic engagement on the ground were becoming well-established, the Internet beckoned to Marc Weiss as a tantalizing new frontier for virtual forms of public engagement and community building. “I wanted to experiment with the medium and figure out how to use it to engage public issues and be a public space in an environment that was going to be commercialized pretty rapidly,” he said.

Weiss had been online for many years, setting up the computer system for *P.O.V.* and working with databases he had created for an organization he had established earlier, Media Network. He recalled setting up *P.O.V.* Online, to develop content and structure for a Web site in development, *POV.org*. His intention, he said, was to create virtual opportunities for viewers to connect around issues raised by documentaries, as they had when he was showing 16mm films in colleges and community halls.

Early in 1994, America Online (AOL), which then had the largest online consumer subscriber base, suggested that *P.O.V.* use one of its online chat spaces in conjunction with broadcast. “A guest would ‘appear’ and, in theory, people could ask the filmmaker questions and the guest would answer,” Weiss recalled. “It was all done by typing. It was one of those experiments doomed to fail. Rarely did people who had actually seen the film get into the online environment.”

Trying a more focused approach, *P.O.V.* set up a listserv through the Institute for Global Communications (IGC), a nonprofit Internet service provider. Listservs were set up for four films, including Allie Light and Irving Saraf’s *Dialogues with Madwomen* (1994). “It was a wonderful film about six or seven women who had been through the mental health maw, including Allie Light herself,” said Weiss. “Enough people got involved so it had a critical mass and an interesting discussion got going.”

Encouraged by this success, *P.O.V.* launched a listserv for the broadcast of Laurel Chiten’s *Twitch and Shout* (1995), a film told from the perspective of people with Tourette Syndrome. The objective was to draw both general audience members and viewers personally affected by Tourette into discussion. According to Weiss, the remarkable dialogue it triggered couldn’t have happened in any other context. “After a week or 10 days, audience members who had come into the discussion out of curiosity fell away,” recalled Weiss. “But the people who were involved found each other and wanted to keep talking. Gradually, it took on a life of its own and became a support group. It was an extraordinary demonstration of the potential of the Internet as a place to convene what we then called communities of interest.” With *P.O.V.*’s blessing, the listserv eventually spun off as a facilitated online support network that continues to operate as Sunrise Tourette, Inc.

Weiss created *P.O.V.* Interactive to handle the opportunities of the World Wide Web. One of its early projects was *POV.org*, the first Web site developed for a public television series. “We can take credit for proselytizing the notion of a public television series having a Web site,”

Weiss asserted. The *P.O.V.* team did a presentation at the June 1995 PBS annual meeting, sharing their experiences of using this new medium with producers of other series, many of whom were inspired to launch their own Web sites. In that first season, however, *POV.org* was basically a publishing site, offering background information on upcoming films and filmmakers.

The first interactive Web site, in the summer of 1996 was tied to *Just for the Ride*, Amanda Micheli's film about women's rodeo. The broadcast chosen for the second interactive site was Freida Lee Mock's Academy Award-winning film *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (1996). The film is about the young architecture student who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, her courageous defense of her artistic vision, and the extraordinary impact the memorial has on its visitors.

"In her film, Maya Lin says, 'I try and create spaces that provoke people to think without telling them what to think,' " recalled Weiss. "Our task was to create a Web site to reflect that spirit. An equivalent to how each individual goes to the Vietnam memorial and has their own personal experience." Weiss, reminded of how his own ideas and values had been shaped by the Vietnam War, designed a Web site that would elicit stories from viewers—not about their experiences of the war itself, but rather how that had shaped who they had become.

"I also wondered if it would be possible in a web environment to create a bridge and a space where people who couldn't talk during the '60s and early '70s could now talk with the remove of 20 years," he said. Because audience members were being asked to do something unfamiliar, the Web site was threaded through with framing questions and narratives that encouraged people to tell the kind of stories *P.O.V.* was hoping to feature on the site. Following the November 1996 broadcast, thousands of people visited *Re: Vietnam: Stories since the War*, a site which came to include open forums, curated editions, and a listserv. Visitors could reflect on how they had been changed by the experience of the war, navigating through personal stories, essays, poems, photographs, and voice mails, and adding their own thoughts to the ever-expanding site. Stories were searchable in a database that over time included several hundred entries. In addition to the open database, there was an unmoderated area for dialogue. "We wanted to make sure that people understood that this was open to all perspectives," Weiss explained. An invitation-only listserv brought together a diverse group of people in a more focused dialogue. "That was an emotionally powerful discussion, taking the model of discussion across difference and kicking it up a notch," said Weiss. "Or three notches."

The first months of open postings surpassed expectations. The site drew a range of participants, from veterans and those who had lost loved ones in the war to anti-war activists. When arguments flared, people stepped in to cool things down. “I was getting e-mails from veterans saying that this discussion was changing how they thought about themselves. For me that’s the holy grail,” said Weiss.

But it wasn’t entirely positive. In 1997, an anti-war activist who had continued to goad veterans despite efforts by Weiss and others to control his behavior was receiving veiled death threats. Horrified, Weiss shut down the board and deleted the threatening messages. “That site embodied the best and the worst of what the Web could be. It was never going to be the pure utopian vision. It showed that once the downward spiral starts, there are very few tools to keep it from progressing and bottoming out.”

In spring 1997, this experiment was taken a step further, with the creation of Web Lab, an independent initiative of American Documentary, Inc., under Weiss’ direction. In collaboration with then-executive producer Lisa Heller, Web Lab supervised the production of *P.O.V.* Web sites and dialogues and solicited bids for targeted sites for particular shows. In the 1998 season, viewers could register for Web Lab’s *P.O.V.* Salon—limited-membership discussion groups modeled on book clubs, which were accessible on the *P.O.V.* Web site. The Salon, with its requirement to opt-in, incorporated many of the lessons of previous online experiments to draw diverse participants willing to give time to thoughtful, democratic discussion on critical social issues.

After one season as an American Documentary project, Web Lab was spun off as an independent entity at the end of 1998, to promote innovative approaches to online dialogue across difference.

By its 10th season, *P.O.V.* had expanded and enriched the spaces and resources of public media, with independent social issue documentary at the core. Its outreach initiatives were leveraging partnerships with stations and nonprofit service organizations and fostering a network that extended to schools, libraries, and grassroots groups. Strategies and tools incubated by *P.O.V.* to frame civic dialogue around critical social issue and move viewers to become active citizens were in wide use.

The organization was well-positioned to meet the transformative era of truly participatory online media.

Cara Mertes (1999–2006) and Completing the Broadcast Loop

When independent media veteran Cara Mertes took over the reins as executive producer of *P.O.V.* in 1999, *P.O.V.* was entering a dynamic, interactive, multiplatform media world. Entire cable channels, such as IFC and Sundance, were now dedicated to documentary film, and digital technologies were transforming media production and delivery, along with relationships between broadcasters and audiences. For Mertes, it was an opportune time to reconceive the public media space of *P.O.V.*—to “complete the broadcast loop” in forward-thinking ways.

“I wanted to create an organic whole that consolidated pre-production, production, post-production, broadcast, and interactive,” she recalled. “Working with all the stakeholders—from filmmakers, to the public television system, to audiences—giving them the tools they need to be better citizens; basically helping people become more active in democracy.”

A producer, writer, and programmer, Mertes has been a presence in independent and public media since 1988. At New York’s flagship PBS station, she was a producer of WNET’s *Independent Focus* and *New Television*—two of public television’s primary independent and experimental media showcases; her video art pieces and films have been shown in museums, at festivals and on television; and she executive-produced and directed *Signal to Noise: Life with Television* (1996), an award-winning PBS series exploring the impact of television on daily life. In 2006, she left *P.O.V. /American Documentary* to become director of the Documentary Film Program at the Sundance Institute.

“Marc Weiss’s original concept of supporting independent documentary and connecting it to the public was rich,” Mertes said, “and I felt the time was right culturally to expand the project in every way, from production to distribution, education and outreach, and interactively. Not just to reach audience, but to engage existing audiences and endeavor to create new ones.

Her priorities included support for the growth of a healthy independent documentary genre, expanding online creative spaces, and maximizing the potential of a multimedia landscape with multiple venues and delivery systems. “Any film we signed on to do could go out in the world in, say, five ways, with four different constituencies,” she said.

I wanted to make the offerings consistent, so that every film we chose had a full array of educational materials, and teaching materials, with resources and background on the films, filmmakers, and issues, all available on a Web site, with a press and public awareness campaign keyed to the broadcast. In this way, we, not only supported the broadcast, but also the filmmaker's career.

Three departments and several initiatives were established or expanded to systematize the delivery of services: Communications and Marketing, Community Engagement, *P.O.V.* Interactive, and production and distribution initiatives, including *P.O.V.*'s Youth Views and the Diverse Voices Project. These activities built on the partnerships that had become critical to extending the reach of *P.O.V.* documentaries. The educational and community engagement programs that are a hallmark of the series rest on sustainable relationships with schools, libraries, and nonprofit organizations, while collaboration with other organizations within the landscape of public and commercial media have helped the series to expand its programming and distribution horizons.

P.O.V. started as an acquisition showcase, with occasional co-productions. In Mertes's view, *P.O.V.* and its producing nonprofit umbrella, American Documentary, Inc., could be more effective if co-productions became a regular activity. By the time of her departure, up to half of each year's schedule was made up of American Documentary co-productions. The Diverse Voices Project rekindled a relationship with the five members of the Minority Programming Consortia, to develop and fund programs of particular relevance to their communities, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. This collaboration was initially formalized in a mentorship initiative called the Minority Investment Fund (1983–1986), which was supported by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and Aaron Diamond Foundation. The CPB-funded Diverse Voices Project, launched in 2002, expanded activities across production and outreach; it provided up to \$80,000 in co-production funding to emerging filmmakers, with an array of outreach and educational activities. Peabody and DuPont-Columbia award-winning films such as Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras' *Flag Wars* (2002), Marco Williams and Whitney Dow's *Two Towns of Jasper* (2003), Shola Lynch's *Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed* (2004), and Alex Rivera and Bernardo Ruiz's *The Sixth Section* (2003) emerged from these efforts.

In an effort to revitalize classic independent documentaries, the series also pursued an innovative distribution initiative, *True Lives*, which is an annual selection of award-winning

older films packaged for broadcast through American Public Television (APT). A distributor of syndicated programming for public television stations in the United States, APT has successfully sold the series to secondary stations that tend to promote alternative and riskier work. Under Mertes, *P.O.V.* also successfully reached out to commercial distributors and outlets, including distributors Netflix and Docurama.

Mertes pioneered partnerships with commercial television as well, starting with the public awareness campaign for Whitney Dow and Marco Williams’s feature-length documentary *Two Towns of Jasper*. This film about the 1998 racially motivated murder of a black man in Jasper, Texas, which was shot by two separate crews—one black and one white—provided an unprecedented view of race in America. Mertes recalled:

It was a partnership with ABC *Nightline*, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and PBS—a ‘triple network’ that generated 32 million viewers. The filmmakers introduced us to Tom Bettag, who works with Ted Koppel. I designed a week-long scheduling roll-out for PBS and ABC News *Nightline*, and *Oprah* came on board, as well. I got on the phone with CPB and I said, “We have this unique opportunity to bring Ted Koppel to PBS for the first time, using *Two Towns of Jasper* to amplify a national dialogue on race in America.”

The filmmakers appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *ABC News Nightline* carried a series of programs over three nights, January 21–23, 2003, in conjunction with the January 22 broadcast premiere, including a preview of the film and lengthy interviews with the filmmakers on *Nightline*. Events culminated in a live 90-minute town hall meeting, “America in Black and White: Jasper, Texas,” anchored by Ted Koppel in Jasper, co-produced by American Documentary, Inc., and broadcast on PBS in primetime on January 23, with an edited repeat broadcast later on ABC. It was the first time ABC had allowed Koppel to appear on PBS. In Mertes’s opinion, by retaining editorial control and setting the agenda for the topic, this cross-over with mainstream media protected the integrity of the film, as it amplified its message.

Two Towns of Jasper is also an example of the effort to make *P.O.V.*’s offerings consistent from film to film. Cynthia Lopez, then-director of communications and now *P.O.V.* vice president, commented, “We were highlighting a cross-network media campaign, a community engagement campaign, and a *Talking Back* campaign.”

Mertes noted that during her tenure *P.O.V.* became a significant innovator in digital public media space—producing Webby Award-winning online content, including *P.O.V.’s Borders* (www.pov.org/borders), an interactive storytelling experiment that was the first Web-only series on PBS. She pointed to the fact that *Talking Back*, a longtime *P.O.V.* video letter feature, was taken online and expanded. By 2003, *P.O.V.* was on its way to providing individual Web sites for each film, featuring podcasts, streaming video, filmmaker interviews, story updates, and opportunities for viewer engagement, as well as educational materials and facilitators’ guides.

On-the-ground and digital initiatives proceeded in tandem, as evidenced by *P.O.V.’s* Youth Views. “What didn’t exist was training young people in how to use media as a tool in their own work,” said Mertes. “We looked for people who were going to be organizers, activists, engaged people. It was natural that the work we were doing with independent artists was going to be useful for people working in the service of particular issues.”

Annual Youth Views Institutes now train a diverse cross-section of young people, 16–19, in a program that combines media literacy approaches and case studies with organizers and filmmakers discussing their techniques and experiences in using film to engage and motivate audiences.

Mertes, who also became executive director of American Documentary, Inc., in 2005, believes that independent artists are critical to a diverse and democratic media system. Therefore, filmmakers and their storytelling—dependent on the fragile economics of the documentary field—remain at the heart of *P.O.V.* “Building on the legacy established at *P.O.V.*, I was working to create a sustainable infrastructure of support, feedback, and audience

Public media particularly need to support and feature art in the service of a vibrant public life.

engagement for the independent documentary artist’s voice. *P.O.V.* is an annual statement about what’s possible with documentary storytelling.”

When she left *P.O.V.* to become director of the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program, Mertes had nearly tripled the budget to over \$3 million,

extended the length of the series to 16 weeks, introduced prime time *P.O.V.* specials on PBS, and expanded national *P.O.V.* events from less than 50 to more than 300 per year.

She now believes that *P.O.V.* has had major impact on the quality, quantity, and reception of independent documentary in the U.S.: “The legacy of the series is embedded in the expanded presence of documentary—from the mission and mandate of organizations such as ITVS and the ITVS/PBS series *Independent Lens* to its presence on everything from the Sundance Channel to IFC to A&E.” For Mertes, “It’s about understanding that creativity is a fundamental human activity, and public media particularly is called upon to support and feature creative expression in the service of a vibrant public life.”

Simon Kilmurry and Cynthia Lopez (2006–), Moving Forward

In 2006, *P.O.V.* veterans Simon Kilmurry (CEO) and Cynthia Lopez (VP) assumed leadership of the organization. Kilmurry had joined American Documentary in 1999 as CFO, with experience in nonprofit cultural organizations. Lopez became *P.O.V.* director of communications in 1999, after serving as advocacy director for Libraries for the Future, a nonprofit organization that helps libraries better serve their communities. Their vision for *P.O.V.* remains grounded in the series’ longstanding commitments to diversity, public engagement, and service to the field of independent documentary, as they consider the opportunities and challenges in a turbulent media environment.

“I’m big on honoring the past,” said Kilmurry. “Marc’s founding vision for the organization was fairly simple: creating a space in public television for independent work. It’s still fundamental. All the other things that we do are additive and we’re expanding on it. Independent storytelling is the essential element.”

While long-form documentaries—nuanced stories about the human experience of social issues—remain at the core, the economy that supports this labor-intensive work is uncertain. Digital technologies open multiple delivery systems, but production funding is in short supply. Kilmurry talked about exploring economic solutions for a healthy documentary field, ranging from incubator funding for new projects to hybrid distribution models that can produce reliable revenue streams.” As a nonprofit organization, we don’t want to lose money on things, but there are ways we can facilitate, subsidize, and use *P.O.V.*’s 20-year reputation to help.”

Digital delivery systems are making it possible for filmmakers to take control of their own distribution. *P.O.V.* provides free consultations with experts in digital distribution, and offers the leverage of *P.O.V.* broadcast and resources to filmmakers preparing for the marketplace. In another boost for documentary filmmakers, Kilmurry played a key role in the successful

campaign to persuade insurance companies to accept the principles of fair use in granting Errors and Omissions coverage to documentary filmmakers who work within guidelines set out in the Center for Social Media publication *Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use*. This saves cash-strapped filmmakers significant time and money in obtaining the rights to show and use copyright-protected materials in their films.

Lopez, a communications specialist who has dramatically increased *P.O.V.*'s press coverage and spearheaded innovative public awareness initiatives, was an architect of the cross-promotion campaign for *Two Towns of Jasper*. She welcomes opportunities to take the mission to network television: "It is the quickest way to distribute information in a uniform way. We've had a partnership with *ABC News* for the last two years. They take several of our shows each season and do wraparounds on their news programs on radio, television, and online."

The goal, for Lopez, is to ensure that the filmmaker's vision is distributed as widely as possible. The *P.O.V.* communications team works with each filmmaker to provide a customized public awareness campaign, community screenings and a well-furnished Web site, along with basic training on how to reach targeted constituencies. Citing examples like Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre's *Maquilapolis* (2006) and Roger Weisberg's *Waging a Living* (2006), Lopez noted, "We're able to bring together the filmmaker's vision, what activists are doing on the ground, and what communities are facing in this country to address, not only changing demographics, but issues that arise from changing economies globally."

Extending outreach is an organizational goal that serves both the filmmaker and the public. Says Kilmurry, "*P.O.V.* films are not polemics; they can engage people across the spectrum of opinion. We want them to be seen by as many people as we possibly can. It's all free, part of our mission. It all goes back to creating dialogue."

In Lopez's view, public media hasn't yet begun to maximize its potential. She envisions an expansive public media landscape that links broadcasters with nonprofit organizations, online communities, schools, museums, and libraries. "Look at our library system, for instance, and the layers of potential for a truly public media landscape. We have yet to play a role in defining what public media can be."

P.O.V.'s mission has been consistent from the start: to provide a platform for independent nonfiction film and to engage and activate audiences. While the long-form documentary

is still, in Kilmurry's opinion, the essential building block, it has become what he calls "the larger whole" from which multiple versions for multiple platforms are fashioned.

Theresa Riley, director of *P.O.V.* Interactive, notes, "Technology is just catching up with the original idea." *P.O.V.* Web sites provide context—articles, interactive pieces, podcasts, video streaming, interviews with experts and filmmakers—that enable viewers to connect each film to broader issues. At the same time, YouTube, Flickr, iTunes, and blogs are building new relationships and opportunities for dialogue beyond broadcast. Riley anticipates a world of ubiquitous and open wireless capacity. "It is," she says, "an amazing opportunity to make and see media. One that *P.O.V.* should be prepared to utilize."

CONCLUSION

P.O.V. has played a unique role in answering the question, "Where is the public in public media?" Over the years, the series has brought to light contested perspectives and thorny issues that move publics to respond, debate, and coalesce. Center for Social Media executive director, media critic, and scholar Patricia Aufderheide has called *P.O.V.* an "electronic public space"—a place where people find things they want and need to know and where they can interact with others about issues of shared concern. As a showcase of independent nonfiction film and an incubator of models and tools for social engagement, it has been a catalyst for public culture.

These interviews tell the story of the evolution of the series from the "point of view" of the executive producers whose vision and talents have shaped *P.O.V.*'s growth and direction. Through their eyes, we see instructive examples of the struggle to create truly public media. While they do not provide a comprehensive view of either *P.O.V.* or public television, they provide important insights into a pioneering organization, and its many contributions to the development of an expansive conception of the role that public media can play in democratic life.

The series was a showcase for first-person storytelling and subjective voices long before they became common modes of expression in mass media. But, unlike in much commercial "reality" media, personal stories were framed as portals to vital social and political issues—fortified with rich contextualizing information and participatory opportunities.

P.O.V. has deepened the content of public television by privileging subjects and voices rarely present in commercial media —platforming the work of filmmakers of color and introducing issues of race and class into broader public conversation. And it has pushed the boundaries of public television by offering challenging programming that views controversy as an opportunity to articulate the rationale for public media in a democratic society. According to Mertes:

We have provided the logic for how independent artists are critical to a vision of a diverse media system, and how [these films] provide different viewpoints that commercial media doesn't. And when the criticisms come in, which they always do, you can say, "We're sorry you're upset, but what we're doing is really based in the Constitution."

By demonstrating the power, quality, and audience appeal of social issue documentary, *P.O.V.* helped to lay the groundwork for year-round documentary programming on public television. Its strategic outreach initiatives have played an important role in extending the uses of documentary film by schools, libraries, and nonprofit organizations, thus creating new circuits of circulation.

It is the filmmakers who remain at the heart of *P.O.V.* Even as digital distribution opportunities proliferate, the economy of long-form social issue documentary filmmaking grows more fragile. As *P.O.V.* has evolved, the project has continued to focus on establishing a stable platform for independent nonfiction film, working to fortify infrastructure for a healthy documentary economy and scaffolding for sustainable public engagement. Such creativity would be richly rewarded in a commercial context; for those involved, the payoff has been a richer public discourse. Says Mertes, "If *P.O.V.* were a business, we would have sold it for a billion dollars by now."

The story of *P.O.V.*'s development demonstrates that a structural understanding of the documentary market and its business models and constraints is needed to support and nurture both documentary production and public media in emerging online platforms. Its trajectory shows that public media projects must combine their visions for mission and content with a grounded analysis of the media market. While public media is often subsidized, media-makers must be willing to experiment with new revenue streams, distribution outlets, and strategic partnerships in order to survive and thrive in an increasingly noisy and competitive environment.

P.O.V. is not only an incubator of social tools, spaces, and practices of public media. It has also been a testing ground for public media leadership. One of the most remarkable aspects of the organization is the way in which its executive producers have taken the *P.O.V.* vision of the potential and mission of public media into their work beyond public broadcasting. Marc Weiss is now the executive producer of Web Lab, developing innovative Web-based projects that bring fresh perspectives and new voices to the discussion of public issues. Ellen Schneider is now the executive producer of Active Voice, a strategic communication organization that focuses on media as a tool for change in communities, workplaces, and campuses. And Cara Mertes is now the director of the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program.

***P.O.V.* documentaries privilege subjects and voices rarely present in commercial media.**

After two decades, *P.O.V.* serves as a testament to the determination

of independent filmmakers and their allies to challenge the embedded power structures of both mainstream and public media, and to combine quality storytelling with a social justice mission. From *Dark Circle* to *Two Towns of Jasper* to *Maquilapolis*, *P.O.V.* has highlighted issues and perspectives ignored or marginalized by commercial media, offering personal stories as a mirror and corrective to the larger society.

Veteran documentarian Ralph Arlyck, whose *Following Sean* appears in *P.O.V.*'s 2007 line-up, sums it up:

I've always believed that independent producers should be the essence and primary impetus of PBS, not its stepchildren. And so I've tended to regard series like *P.O.V.* as ghettos where the folks in Alexandria would stick us to appease media watchdogs and Congress. But, like most of the institutions we founded ourselves (IFP, Film Arts, New Day, IDA, the defunct AIVF), *P.O.V.* has grown from a small group of petitioners into a prestigious showcase. All these organizations were created by visionaries, usually in desperation, and were later improved by talented people who came after. They're our inheritance, our sustenance, and our legacy.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

On POV awards: pbs.org/pov/utills/aboutpov_awards.html

On POV films through the years: pbs.org/pov/filmarchive.php?sort=date

On POV history: http://pbs.org/pov/utills/aboutpov_history02a.html

On documentary film and public knowledge and action:

centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/audience_engagement/

centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/making_your_documentary_matter/

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