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Democracy from the Ground Up: Reflections on Grassroots Media

Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong

Grassroots media are often taken to be “in your face,” confrontational, and adversarial. Activist circles and the academy celebrate such media for their authenticity as well as their oppositional stance vis-a-vis mainstream media, a liberation through new technology and new voices. As an ethnographer/videographer teaching in communication, I know that such grassroots media generally are also seen by community organizers, media activists, academics and students, as a vital representation of the diverse voices of ethnic and sexual minorities across the United States. At the same time, I am wary of taking these texts as simple examples of the promises of new, alternative media in the United States. This very championing of alternative and authentic media, as I argue, may overlook their complexity, their negotiations of form and audience, and their actual uses and impacts. This is not to say that these media cannot be controversial or oppositional; my analysis of one community-based production program since 1993 argues that the story is even *more* complicated. These

media may change attitudes or challenge power. However, we should examine the experiences of those who make and use these media to discover the types of complex challenges that may result.

Certainly, the structural position of such small grassroots products in contemporary political economics immediately underscores their differences from the mass media organizations that communication studies often have examined. While most mainstream media have rationalized institutional structures, for example, community media have more fluid constituent elements and boundaries. This extends to their roles in the production and reproduction of capital. Time Warner demands intense capital investment, deeply enmeshed in the market place. Neighborhood newsletters, group videos, and street theater, meanwhile, are low-cost efforts, which often face a day-to-day struggle to balance their books but may make few or no monetary demands on audiences as consumers.

In terms of production personnel, mainstream media also generally remain closed to novices without the requisite credentials. By contrast, grassroots media may embrace interested participants who are neither fully qualified nor fully committed to professional careers in media. In fact, they often rely on volunteer and part-time workers drawn by shared interests or social connections rather than paid staff.

Public cable access and other forms of media can provide a sense of wider distribution and coalition building, that coalesces with movements towards recognition and expression of diverse race, ethnic, gender, sexual, and class identities within American life to yield new products and venues. Hence a recently restored community access series of 1968, *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant*, can be characterized by technological and sociological meanings:

a belief in local control and a conviction that the community could use the medium to define itself and explore issues of concern in its own words, 'a concerted promotion plan that brought news of the show to 'churches, schools and the like,' an explicitly political

content in the programming which reflected this 'unique time in black political, economic, and psychological development,' and a raw and rudimentary style. The ability for blacks to shoot and see their own neighborhood, their own political candidates, their own artists and neighbors and anger, was integrally related to the politics of black power (Juhasz 1995:41).

Content and reception in grassroots media also raise important questions. Ultimately, despite the participation and voice alternative media may evoke, the public generally contrasts mainstream and community media through a simple dichotomy of professional versus amateurish. Grassroots productions, are ultimately about people and message, and may be modest, cheap and even slipshod in form without losing sight of that goal. Some may consider community media products well-intentioned, but ultimately insignificant, while others overlook these features in favor of truthfulness and honesty.

Grassroots videos are often about the video makers themselves, exploring their own perspectives on community concerns and communicating with others whom they know, or know about. This relationship of producer and subject contrasts with the subjects of mainstream documentary or news videos, who sometimes cannot control their own representation and otherwise become reduced to objects within mass media products. Thus, my studies of community video evoke issues of self-representation and the local formation of symbols reminiscent of anthropology and folklore studies of community construction through craft and artifact. As in these studies, we must be careful to distinguish the quilt as museum object from the meanings of the quilt as wedding gift and bedcover that also have defined community stories.

In this paper, I explore these issues of significance, confrontation, and meaning by examining a single community media product, *Face to Face: It's Not What You Think*. This 15-minute video was produced in 1995-96 by a group of Philadelphia Asian-American high school age students affiliated

with Asian Americans United. Students, staff members and facilitators (including me) worked in conjunction with the Community Visions Project of Philadelphia's Scribe Video Center (See Wong 1997 and 1999) for a longer discussion of Scribe and its program; Adams, et al., 1991 for urban background). In order to understand the video's claim to truth and meaning, I will examine *Face to Face* as both a text and a process. This includes the social circumstances of its production as well as its distribution and exhibition. To do so, I first provide a brief synopsis and then examine how this text was created. This will explain the cooperative production process involved. The final section focuses on the reception of the text, exploring yet another layer of meaning created at the interstices of producer, texts, exhibition environment, and audience (See Michaels 1994, Martinez 1992).

Face to Face: Introducing the Video

Face to Face is divided into five sections of roughly equal length. In these, a cross-section of Asian-American youths between 14 and 18, talk about issues of identity, schools, stereotypes, gangs, and police harassment. The tape begins dramatically with an Asian American teenage male walking through a park while an increasingly loud voiceover of ethnic slurs berate him until he unleashes a scream. It ends with a poem written and read by one of the teens, asserting all their rights to be treated equally.

There is not a single hero in the tape; it is a group project where an ensemble of Asian American youths present collective, yet diverse voices. Some of those who appear on camera were involved in production; others were friends or classmates. While they shared an urban milieu, these youths differed in ethnic background (Kampuchean, Chinese, Vietnamese), academic commitments and life choices, including gang membership, career and family plans.

A roughly equal amount of footage was shot in the homes of these youths and in the streets of Philadelphia and the Asian neighborhoods that they know best. Some other scenes

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 are shot in schools, and a few examples of mainstream media stereotypes from Hollywood films like *The World of Suzie Wong* and *Sixteen Candles* are intercut with these scenes. The tape ends with celebration of family and community lives within more traditional settings, like Chinese New Year Lion Dance in Chinatown, as well as shots of members of the production team, waving to the camera in their homes.

Despite reliance on interviews and discussion, *Face to Face* immediately differs from the kinds of text one sees in mainstream broadcasting. First, it only deals with Asian-American youths. The issues are recognizable: racial harassment in schools, the complexity of having a brother who is a gang member, the pain of immigration, and their struggles to be treated “like everyone else.” Moreover, the attitude is expository rather than judgmental. We see neither the model minority nor the problematized immigrant as underlying reasons to focus on the group. Instead, they tell their story without a news “hook.”

Unlike mainstream reports, the product is not very polished. The tape was shot with Hi 8 video, thus lacking the high, and sharp resolution a more expensive format provides. Some visual features, like slow-motion parodies of kung fu or the juxtaposition of a talking head interview with the same face on a screen, grew from our play while learning to use the camera, and were included in the final work. Yet there is no consistent style or vision to the material. This reflects not only the absence of a single director but also the dilemmas of a production schedule that meshed uneasily with adolescent lives.

The video is also polemical. The youths vehemently accuse the police of harassing them because they are Asian Americans. They are equally harsh on “ignorant” people who belittle them with stereotypes, like those of the “slanted eye Asians”. Here youths address the camera directly, pulling up their eyes to insist on the ridiculous quality of the stereotype. Comments on police are sarcastic and profane, although this tone reflects how youth talk in general, as well as an intense distaste. Some comments are directed toward other Asian-

Americans as well and deal with diversity within the Asian-American community. One girl, for example, whose speech and style coincides with that of her African-American peers insists "I'm not a Black wannabe; I'm not a White wannabe. I'm Asian."

Face to Face is typical of other community video projects with which I have worked in Philadelphia. In part, this springs from its production process as part of a long-term commitment by filmmakers to aid community groups in finding video expression. Under the leadership of documentarian Louis Massiah, the Community Visions series that Scribe has fostered since 1991, has created thirty works expressing the concerns of local community groups. Many share the same textual features of this video: straightforward exposition with moments of experimentation; reliance on talking heads and discussion of issues, a polemical yet colloquial tone, and a look cobbled together out of efforts over many months.

In fact, many of these characteristics would not be foreign to the experience of grassroots videos across the nation and the world, whether facilities are provided by public access, individual activists or government grants. Yet, to fully understand this particular work, we must also look at production via strategies and choices.

***Face to Face* Community: The Ethnography of Production**

Working as a facilitator on this video for a year, I learned that combating stereotypes was important to the Asian American youths who made it. This group negotiated intensely about how they wanted themselves and "their community" to be represented. This affected both themes and form.

The tape was made by ten youths and one adult leader at Asian American United (AAU) in Philadelphia. A Korean-American colleague and I were the facilitators providing technical and planning expertise to the project. Eight Cambodian-American and two Chinese American youths were regular participants over weeks of Saturday morning labs; the AAU leader, Juli, was Korean-American. The Asian-

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American facilitators and leaders came from very different educational and professional backgrounds than the youths. Hence, problems of Asian American representation were discussed at great length.

The youths understood, nonetheless, that the tape could not address all issues. They could not talk about South Asians, for example. In fact, that they could only talk of themselves as kinds of Asian-American rather than claiming essential or comprehensive views characteristic of mainstream news or documentaries. Juli asserted that she only saw the tape as adding to the mosaic that is Asian American life. Here we can already see that the work represents "Asian-Americanness" in a limited way.

Saturday mornings (and additional sessions) ended up going beyond production as we sought to help the youths make their own video. Part of the time was spent in technical training, including using disposable cameras to learn how to explore neighborhoods and frame shots. Technical training and scripting took three to four months. These sessions also involved play and food from nearby Chinese or Vietnamese restaurants. In short, production entailed building community as well as expressing it.

Training also involved discussion of the possibilities of various film and video models. We went to see Asian-American documentaries presented at International House in Philadelphia. Yet while these were nationally, albeit not widely distributed products, we found that the youths did not necessarily take them as models for engagement, content, or even form. "Serious" documentaries about racism, in fact, were not the mode through which they communicated with each other.

While the work is alternative, the youths themselves were never die-hard community /media activists. They came together for the video primarily to find a channel to express their concerns that mirrored ways that they talked with each other. They are also consumers of mainstream American media culture: music, television, film. Despite the presentation of alternatives, their media education and that of their peers

comes from mainstream American culture, with some exception via programming from their native countries and Hong Kong. While these young producers are transnationals, their media literacy has been derived mainly from American hegemonic discourse. This explains some of the MTV-style sequences seen at the opening of the tape, and the kung-fu sequences. Even cuts necessitated by flawed footage or lack of continuous development of materials reinforced familiarity with media where rapid cuts, disjunctive imagery and sardonic responses are part of a generation's conventions.

These youths began from everyday concerns rather than from a narrative vision. Over the course of discussion and filming, they poured out many of their thoughts and feelings on the tape. However, in the course of this discussion they also raised and omitted themes central to their societies and cultures, especially with regard to families. For example, they did not include generational conflicts on tape. During the four to five months where the youths met every Saturday at Asian American United to discuss the tape, many were concerned with their relationships with their parents. Often members of the "1.5" generation who have immigrated after birth but grew up in the U.S., would say that their parents "still think that this is Cambodia, rather than America." They complained that they were expected to be good children, who do well in schools, dress appropriately, and stay home at the right time -- which would set them apart from youth networks in their school and neighborhood.

This subject was never discussed on tape, however, because the youths do not want to offend their parents. Furthermore, they felt that they wanted to make a tape that would reach a broader non-Asian community. Hence, the main message for them focussed on "external" problems stemming from racism and difference that they shared vis-à-vis this society rather than points of difference in how they perceived the home

This emphasis on everyday issues, in the end, constitutes the compelling authenticity of this and other community videos I have explored. Complaints about school, for example, <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique/vol17/iss1/3>
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Hing-Yuk Wong: Democracy from the Ground Up: Reflections on Grassroots Media are concrete rather than abstract -- the paucity of materials on Asian-American history or the need to take classes after school to deal with heritage issues. Girls laugh about the embarrassment of being categorized ethnically on special days by "folk dances" or costumes none would ever wear in normal circumstances. As one remarks, Asian dress is more likely to be baggy jeans and a T-shirt than an elaborate dancing costume derived from Khmer courts. These complaints are strengthened as they are delivered by Asian Americans comfortable in jeans and T-shirts and other cultural associations of globalized western culture. When such public cultural presentations are intercut, in the final credits, with casual home scenes, this irony of imposed identity is reinforced.

In the end, discussions of identity, school, stereotypes, gangs and police evoke problems of the construction of historical knowledge or the "Orientalization" of immigrants. Yet while we may read these in the tape, these youths did not seek to express abstract issues so much as to convey the immediacy of their experience.

This immediacy also weaves personal messages into the narrative in a manner that is an ingroup subtext for many community videos. That is, these are messages that, while not interfering or concealing narrative issues, make sense only if you know the people involved. In this case, the students faced tragedy as the sister of one videographer was murdered as she tended a store in an interracial neighborhood in South Philadelphia. As they explained at the premiere, they decided to dedicate their video to her and include footage of her in the closing credits. As the video is distributed to wider audiences, this personal anchor disappears -- yet remains alive with the community of producers and families who know its origins.

Other negotiations emerged in the mechanics of production, as teams went out to shoot footage. At times, for example, while the familiarity of these youths' interactions with friends produced lively conversations, technical features of sound and focus suffered in neighborhood give and take. Attempts to structure a fictionalized depiction of kung-fu as a stereotype also emerged from off-camera play, yet foundered

when the youths tried to restage them as a more formal, "acted" scene.

Moreover, as we came to the final, arduous stages of editing and assembly, some gaps became irremediably apparent. Basic establishing shots of neighborhoods and streets, for example, had been overlooked in shooting for the contents: we did special runs at the end to provide a context of place for events and speakers. In other cases, themes from interviews could not be illustrated from other materials because of problems of lighting or sound in the footage; again, talking heads predominate in this as in many other videos. Moreover, the grueling work of editing, at the end of a year's work, challenged the commitment of many participants. Only a few students, the organizer, facilitators and another local videographer, Frank Garzon, pushed the project through to its final form.

As producers, finally, these youths and AAU did not pay much attention to a targeting audience except a general vague sense of Asian American versus non-Asian Americans. Nonetheless, the video has received relatively wide distribution and strong reaction from both Asian Americans and others.

Reception and Recreation

Face to Face had its formal premiere at the International House in Philadelphia in 1997 as part of the regular presentation of works from Scribe's Community Vision series. This annual theatrical free screening is open to the public and generally well-attended. Participants and families come for each of the three to four videos screened, yielding a full, enthusiastic house of several hundred people, although this experience of community is taken as an end rather than a platform to build upon. Usually only the facilitator and the immediate production team come forward to introduce the tapes and answer questions afterwards. It is very moving experience for the participants

I did not attend the AAU screening on September 20th, 1996, since I was in Hong Kong. Juli wrote me with

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Leap and Pauline talked about how we came to make this video and then called all ten of the youth down to stand in front of the auditorium together. You should have seen, when they stood up there, they looked so proud and happy while the audience clapped so hard for them. The Community Visions audience really know how to make people feel supported and valued. I think the youth felt like it was all worth it. Seeing them up there beaming their proud smiles made me feel damn proud myself. So Cindy, you should be proud too. After the audience clapped for them, Leap thanked you, Carl, Frank, me, AAU, Scribe, Hebert, and she forgot Louis' name so she said "um that man, you know," and the whole audience laughed and said, "Louis!" (Personal correspondence 16 Oct 1996)

For a producer and an audience member, watching the video in this setting proves nerve-racking. Juli continues, "I wanted people to understand it and like it instantly. each moment on the screen lasted longer than the hundreds of times I'd seen it before. It was like watching your alter ego acting out a story on stage....." She later reflected:

"Cindy, I think you were right when you said that it's hard to go in-depth into all of the issues we wanted to talk about. From an objective viewpoint, our video is kind of small in scale and in depth, but if you take into consideration that it's short, that it was made by kids, and that it's only the beginning, I think that the shallowness of it can be pardoned, if audience will be generous enough."

Juli reported that the audience liked the tape: "How could you not? All of the youths were there, and I think they really stole the show."

After all the tapes were shown, participants answered questions. Reth, one of the youth producers “explained that the dedication at the end of the video was for Knom’s sister, an important member of our community and someone that many people in the video project cared about deeply.” Juli also wrote, “Aisha and Nadinne (two other facilitators) ... said how these images are some of the only positive images of ourselves that we have, and that in itself is an important message of these videos.” Sam, an AAU member, commented that it was great to see a youth-made video and to “know there was a place where their opinions and voice were valued and heard.”

The International House screening is one of public celebration with an audience including the organization. It also seems to give closure to the projects. The positive comments recounted by Juli represent assent: each group has a message to communicate and the audience tells them that this has been done. Judging from the euphoric tone of Juli’s letter, these screenings also meant a great deal for all those involved. These people ARE empowered by the action and reception in which they participate.

After the screening, primary distribution of the tapes become the responsibility of each group. In order to gain wider distribution, AAU has entered their tape in different festivals and it is now distributed by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA). It was also shown locally on the PBS outlet. Festivals and broadcasting, however, are not the most important means of distribution, partly because these channels do not allow contact between the producers and the audience.

Instead, the immediate goal of most groups is to bring the tape back to the organization and its outreach. The tape has been shown in different schools and in other youth organizations. Generally, it has been well received by some educators, despite problems showing the tape in school because of its profanity. In these settings, commentary and response emerge as important features at the Q & A session. Many audiences express community with the Asian-American youths in the tape through comments about other incidents

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Hing-Yuk Wong: Democracy from the Ground Up: Reflections on Grassroots Media of racism. Others in the audience, especially middle-class, white Americans unaware of anti-Asian racism, find the tape educational.

The responses have gone beyond dimensions of class and experience as the tape has been shown in college settings, Asians in "model-minority" settings have reacted to the issues of stereotypes in schools, or physical imagery, while the experience of gangs and police harassment might be outside of their upbringing. Some younger Caucasian students at the City University of New York reacted strongly to statements on police harassment, asserting that everyone is harassed by the police, and that it results more from location and clothing style, rather than race. African-Americans outside of Philadelphia also have found the tape educational, as they see themselves sharing the same experience as other inner city youths.

The tape speaks directly to urban youths because of its hip-hop style, and its teenage themes. The tape arouses debates among people from different class and racial backgrounds on issues like identity, police and youths, and rights to expression. Scribe's many productions, in fact, tend to share this characteristic. In *To School or Not to School*, an older video that centers on three school drop-outs in Philadelphia, presents autobiographical portraits that anchor discussions of general issues of education. Students relate directly to the people who speak in this tape.

The *Face to Face* youths themselves have also moved on; at least two have gone to college, while others have focussed on raising families. We sometimes encounter each other, in fact, in Philadelphia's Chinatown. In all, this was not apparently a career-changing or life-changing empowerment, any more than the video can change the lives of Asian-Americans in a broader sense. Voices of local, and varied Asian-Americans continue to be heard not only through the continuing efforts of Asian-Americans United and the Asian Arts Initiative but also through other works. Among the recent Scribe screenings, for example, is another video that essentially recast issues of *West Side Story* within the framework of contemporary Cambodian-American youths in South Philadelphia. Again, rather than

presenting an academic vision of marginality or gangs, the video poses a question in a concrete setting: how should the characters deal with relations and violence? Hence, we see again that community, democracy, and empowerment are not only about political and economic change but about grassroots discussion and responses, built by audiences as well as producers.

Conclusions

I would argue from my experience of guiding, seeing, screening, and studying this work that the text of an individual grassroots video like *Face to Face* powerfully reflects on media and identity. Yet on closer examination, we also understand that this power is not something that resides only in a text and its distribution as an alternative to mainstream media stereotypes (or ignorance) of Asian American life. Instead, the process of making the video, and the varied conditions of its reception continue to create and recreate Asian-American identities. Videographers incorporated personal experiences of American society and culture to be read differently by subsequent groups. *Face to Face* is both powerful statement and intriguing question.

In many ways, however, this case suggests that grassroots media does mean “bottom up”, as seen in the production and use of *Face to Face*. The tape is grassroots in the sense that it involved little capital investment, in the format it used, and the exigencies of production. It is also grassroots in its distribution pattern: not mass marketed, but offered to specific audiences in socially-constructed settings like community screenings or classrooms. In these settings it evokes grassroots responses -- questions about similarity and difference, possibilities of changes in attitudes, realizations that “we are all in this together.”

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