

Documentary Filmmakers

Bridging Practice and Scholarship in Peacebuilding*

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Abstract

In settings characterized by violent conflict, documentary filmmakers serve as a conduit between local experiences and the broader public. Highlighting these experiences requires filmmakers to immerse themselves in a context, digest scholarly findings, interview local sources and organize information into an accessible storyline. Those who utilize this craft often draw from established research or collaborate with scholars to ensure the narrative resonates with people and represents verified events. At the same time, their films contribute to the practice of peacebuilding through a participatory process that focuses on storytelling and community healing. This article explores the dual role of documentary filmmakers by positioning them as potential bridge-builders between practice and scholarship in peacebuilding. Specifically, it looks at the way filmmakers navigate between these realms by countering hegemonic narratives, introducing marginalized voices, contextualizing conflict and sharing stories with a wide audience – while also reflecting on the way their own identities and viewpoints influence this process.

Keywords: documentary, film, peacebuilding, narratives, storytelling.

1 Introduction

Documentary filmmakers have the potential to contribute to peacebuilding by engaging communities affected by violence and providing a space for marginal-

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ized perspectives. Using a locally driven, participatory approach to documentary production positions filmmakers as peace *practitioners* through their simultaneous attention to storytelling, healing and witness. At the same time, creating documentaries that resonate with the communities they represent and confer knowledge about our broader understanding of conflict necessarily requires an in-depth and collaborative research process, which also positions them as peace *scholars*. As such, these filmmakers have an obligation to acknowledge their own positions and biases prior to beginning a project and to reflect on the ethical implications of their decisions. Locating documentary filmmakers in the field of strategic peacebuilding suggests that those engaged in these initiatives are uniquely positioned to serve as bridge-builders between scholarship and practice. This article argues that filmmakers have the ability to navigate between these two realms by expanding the narrative field, contextualizing conflict and creating a visual record of local experiences that can be shared with a wider public.

2 Building Peace through Film

In recent years, scholars have increasingly critiqued the liberal peace model for its 'top-down' approach to peacebuilding and its prioritization of technical knowledge over local expertise (Autesserre, 2014). This model has redirected peacebuilding's focus on "social advocacy and action, from the citizen, the informal sector and on the most marginalised ... in favour of the state, elite bureaucratic, political and business classes" (Richmond, 2010: 667). Documentary filmmakers are well positioned to bridge the gap between state-centric and grassroots approaches by bringing attention to the agency, needs, customs, and mobilization of individuals and local communities. Since the production of a story cannot be imagined without the involvement of local people, filmmaking requires the creation of a space that brings people together to discuss concerns related to conflict and peace. Such spaces allow people to engage in conversation in order to explore and feel a sense of safety and change (Lederach and Lederach, 2010). Using this space, documentary filmmakers can create and recreate the type of meaningful conversations that can help people locate their voices and resilience, thus supporting them to engage in purposeful action toward social change (Niraula, 2015).

Opening up these spaces for conversation and storytelling can also lead to healing and reconciliation among communities. Encouraging local participation in the process of filmmaking and withholding the desire to impose their own story or agenda can enable documentarians to gain a better understanding of meaning making and reality formation among communities faced with violence (Niraula, 2015). Understanding these processes is crucial for promoting the healing and reconciliation so imperative to peacebuilding. As Charbonneau and Parent (2012) have noted, any peacebuilding process that does not prioritize healing brings only a negligible change in 'post-conflict' societies. Sustainable healing and reconciliation occurs within a larger process of conflict transformation that also attends to issues of structural violence, power asymmetry and past injustice (Lederach and

Lederach, 2010). For this reason, storytelling and intergroup dialogue are not by themselves sufficient for healing and reconciliation; yet, they are a critical part of it (Last, 2000; Senehi and Byrne, 2006).

Although not all individuals or cultures may find ‘talk therapy’ beneficial to their process of healing, some suggest that the act of storytelling can lead to a sense of empowerment by allowing people to construct new meanings and re-story both the self and society (Senehi and Byrne, 2006). For example, in her study on the impact of storytelling among women in Ukraine, Flaherty (2012) found that narrating stories allowed women to reflect upon their values and strengths, which further facilitated relationship building among diverse community members. Niraula made a similar observation among the ‘Future Guardians of Peace’ – a group of former child soldiers and war-affected youth in Liberia that use visual documentation for social change. He notes that creating documentaries about people’s experiences in conflict settings not only facilitates healing among the people involved, but also draws an audience to witness these processes of healing, restoration and rebuilding of relationships (Niraula, 2015). Engaging others in the social transformations that are taking place and allowing them insight into these processes can further contribute to sustainable peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997).

3 Expanding the Narrative Field

Crafting a documentary requires decisions about what to include, what not to include, whose story to tell and how to tell it. Conceptualizing and constructing these films require the filmmaker and others involved in the process to navigate the blurry boundaries of knowledge, individual experiences and intersubjectivity. Sometimes this involves engaging with a multitude of narratives that stand in opposition to one another. This becomes further complicated when the narratives include traumatic experiences of conflict, contradicting interpretations or contested historical content. Engaging with research on the role of narratives in conflict and peacebuilding may provide insight into the way filmmakers can utilize narratives and local storytelling in their films. Furthermore, including voices that have been either silenced or marginalized can provide new perspectives on the conflict that inform future research.

Over the past decade, there has been a surge in academic research on the function of narratives and storytelling – particularly as they relate to conflict and peacebuilding. Narratives can be defined as stories that provide sequential and causal coherence about the world and our experience of it (Bar-Tal *et al.*, 2014). They provide continuity between past and present, and – at the individual level – can endow a sense of meaning and purpose to the otherwise haphazard events in one’s life. People interpret the world through the lens of constructed narratives that link the mind with social reality (McAdams and McLean, 2013).

However, narratives are neither monolithic nor static. As Bloch suggests, people use narratives to “talk in different ways about what is known” (1998: 110). They engage with a multiplicity of narratives and utilize them to communicate

different things at different times for different purposes – depending on the social, political and cultural context (Jackson, 2013).

Some scholars suggest that this process of meaning making extends beyond the individual's personal experiences to incorporate 'master narratives' of the social groups to which they belong (Biton and Salomon, 2006; Hammack, 2008). Broader narratives about history, ethnicity, politics and religion influence an individual's stories and shape their identity. People engage with "collective stories of what it means to inhabit a particular political entity, be it a nation-state, a resistance movement, or a political party" (Hammack and Pilecki, 2011: 77). Yet, even group narratives contain plurality, and not everyone adheres to the same stories of collective experience. Rather, people often absorb and rework information from a variety of the messages and discourses operating throughout their social context, offering their own critiques, interpretations and challenges (Hart, 2004).

Group narratives circulate through novels, digital media, speeches, textbooks and any other type of discourse production. According to Hammack and Pilecki:

The idea of narrative transcends disciplinary boundaries in that these storied accounts are located at every level of analysis. They can be identified in the "raw data" of historians, literary critics, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and scholars in fields like education and cultural studies. (2011: 76)

Narrative paradigms look at the spaces between individuals and power structures, and the way stories can be used as resources for empowerment and social change, recognizing that language and discourse have the power not only to describe but also to provoke political transformation (Hammack and Pilecki, 2011; Ledwith, 2005). Jackson adds to this by emphasizing the *action* of storytelling in addition to its content. He argues that creating and sharing narratives is "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (Jackson, 2013: 34). Last (2000) further highlights that the sharing of narratives is a crucial part of sustainable reconciliation. In his research from post-war Nigeria, he found that silencing the past allowed people to cling to unexamined narratives and avoid accountability rather than reworking social memories through conversation with others.

A team of researchers at the Center for Narrative and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University studies the way diverse narratives operate in society. Many socio-political contexts – particularly those characterized by violence – tend to privilege certain narratives over others rather than providing open and inclusive spaces that put multiple narratives in conversation with one another. When this happens:

The narrative field becomes a smaller space that limits a comprehensive deliberative process. We are describing this as a process of narrative compression – it allows little or no access for counter narratives to the field and ena-

bles the dominant narrative to become the sole inhabitant of the discursive space. When counter-narratives are somehow able to penetrate the dominant, its architecture changes and it evolves. (Cobb *et al.*, 2015)

Documentarians can push back against the compressed narratives operating within a particular context by identifying and including perspectives that have been either marginalized or silenced. In addition, filmmakers can counter the media's tendency to increase coverage on violent or divisive events by including stories that show progress, growth and constructive efforts towards conflict transformation. In *Building Peace*, Lederach writes that every violent context he has encountered has included people with a vision for peace:

Far too often, however, these same people are overlooked and disempowered either because they do not represent 'official' power, whether on the side of government or the various militias, or because they are written off as biased and too personally affected by the conflict. (1997: 94)

Bringing these voices into the conversation can interrupt the echo chamber of socio-political discourse, provide nuance to the hegemonic narratives it presents, and introduce new perspectives that further inform the direction of peace and conflict research. Furthermore, it creates a dialectic that allows individuals to reshape and reinterpret their understanding of past events and personal experiences.

4 Contextualizing Conflict

Pamela Yates (2014), a filmmaker whose work addresses issues of human rights and social justice, describes documentaries as something that "straddles the categories of fact and fiction, art and document, entertainment and knowledge". The ability for films to straddle these categories provides a degree of malleability through which filmmakers can present information in a way that increases its emotional impact or achieves particular goals. However, the malleability of this medium can also lend itself to framing information in a way that artificially imposes a clean and cohesive storyline onto a messy and complicated reality. Creating films for a particular audience or dramatizing stories to create a strong emotional impact may inadvertently misrepresent local experiences. Filmmakers can enhance their potential for effectively contributing to peacebuilding by creating a product that represents the experiences of those involved. This can be achieved by grounding the content in both academic scholarship and the knowledge of local communities. Situating documentary filmmaking under the umbrella of peace journalism further supports this need for a rigorous collaborative research process that leads to honest portrayals of local experience.

In the mid-1990s, Galtung (1998) outlined an emerging need for 'peace journalism' to address the issue of selection bias and reductive analyses in the reporting of conflict. Those who promote peace journalism argue that the media sur-

rounding violent conflict most often serves to obstruct the progress towards transformation by focusing on two opposing parties and zero-sum outcomes, conceptualizing conflict as if it exists in closed space and time, and reacting to violence after it occurs by trying to see “who threw the first stone” (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2000). A need for media production that avoids oversimplification also extends to documentary filmmaking.

Documentaries can be utilized to fill a void where certain voices and stories are ignored, while also providing greater context and complexity to the information presented by traditional media and dominant narratives. By adhering to the goals of peace journalism, filmmakers would not only tell stories of peace and progress but also give more weight to structure, culture and process in the telling of their stories (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2007). These films would aim for multi-faceted narratives rather than advocating for a particular side or perspective. In order for a film to resonate with both the audience it targets and the communities it represents, the content being presented needs to be heavily supported. Thus, the creation of films that accomplish these goals necessarily involves an in-depth research process that:

[Assesses content] by comparing them with the answers furnished by researchers in Peace and Conflict Studies. These have been assembled under the normal safeguards of academic rigour in social science: openness about – and preparedness to justify – starting assumptions for both observation and interpretation; and peer reviews. Built into social science, moreover, is the principle of the participant–observer – as soon as you start to observe something, you cannot avoid changing it. (Lynch, 2006)

By tapping into the knowledge and insights gleaned from peer-reviewed scholarship in peace and conflict studies, documentary filmmakers can structure their projects in a way that informs the greater public about the nuances of peacebuilding.

At the same time, it is important to maintain a constant dialogue between the filmmaker and the community in order to ensure that cultural assumptions are addressed and the documentary represents local experiences of the conflict. This entails a process of ‘verifying and re-verifying’ the content of the documentary against multiple sources and perspectives until they agree that it has properly captured their understanding of events (Niraula, 2015: 78). Such a process can resemble a community-engaged ‘peer review’, which prevents filmmakers from manipulating a story to meet his or her desired goal. Bernard (2011) expands on the importance of avoiding manipulative storytelling by cautioning documentary filmmakers against approaching any context with the belief that they already understand the situation. While it may be useful for filmmakers to begin a project with a general idea of what they want to explore, staying open-minded and allowing both the research and the participants to direct the content can create a more authentic story:

Knowing your story (or at least the germ of it) at the start of a project is not the same thing as knowing exactly what you want to say and how. It simply means having an idea of the narrative spine on which you could hang your subject and having at least some idea of themes you want to explore. From there, you need to research, develop, and shoot your story with questions and an open mind. (Bernard, 2011: 41)

Some filmmakers have tried to avoid prescriptive storylines and agendas by mindfully engaging in a process of witnessing, through which they can offset their biases by developing a participant-driven method of storytelling. Filmmakers can 'bear witness' in order to properly understand their subjects and accurately present their lived experiences with the intention that audiences will learn more about it (Rosenthal, 1990).

A potential difficulty with relying on a community-directed 'peer review', however, is that participants from the community may function to reproduce the *status quo* instead of opening up spaces for new and multifaceted narratives. The filmmaker may also perceive certain narratives to be toxic or otherwise harmful to public discourse rather than moving it in a helpful direction. In these cases, the role of the filmmaker and their process of decision making become especially important. Even filmmakers who dedicate themselves to a process of witnessing are not passive conduits of information but active participants in the process of creating it. They bring their own beliefs, opinions and identities to each project, which influence their interactions with the community. The difficulty of balancing their own positions with those of community members once again points to a need for navigating between filmmaking as practice and filmmaking as scholarship. Even as local communities guide and direct the process, filmmakers retain a responsibility to avoid disseminating films that spread hateful messages or contribute verifiably incorrect information.

As they balance between these realms, documentary filmmakers can nonetheless contribute to the wider goals of peacebuilding by producing stories that contextualize conflict through engagement with scholarship, participation of the local population and a process of witnessing. Providing a space for local participants to share and reshape their experiences can facilitate individual transformation and healing, guide action that influences social change at other levels of society and bridge the gap between local communities and global audiences.

5 Insider–Outsider Dynamics

In order to serve as a conduit between insiders (local population) and outsiders (audience), a filmmaker has to address certain ethical dilemmas related to one's identity and its impact on the involvement of subjects. Niraula highlights one such dilemma where the filmmaker feared that her identity as a Westerner would label her as an outsider who had come to impose a Western model of peacebuilding on the local community in Voinjama, Liberia. She worried that the community members would not participate in storytelling because of their general suspicion

and distrust of Westerners (Niraula, 2015). Filmmakers working in conflict settings are especially likely to face this kind of dilemma, which is further complicated by the privileges offered to Westerners by liberal peacebuilding.

The devastation and trauma brought about by violent conflict often results in dysfunction at the local level. The assistance of 'outsiders' can be helpful as societies heal and transition back to normal. While the partnership between insiders and outsiders can lead to effective peacebuilding, conflict transformation is most sustainable when the process is owned and led by those who belong to the local community (Schirch, 2013). In contrast, the liberal peace model tends to validate the superiority and expertise of outsiders. As a result, local communities may be suspicious of Westerners who visit them with the objective of initiating conversations around the issue of peace (Niraula, 2015). It is because of this situation that filmmakers, as outsiders, struggle to gain the trust of local communities and create films that contain honest and authentic storytelling. As mentioned earlier, the process of 'bearing witness' may help filmmakers address this insider-outsider dilemma.

Some filmmakers who locate their work under the umbrella of peacebuilding have abstained from using violent images in their documentaries. This is primarily done to avoid objectifying or exploiting the suffering of those with whom they work. For example, *everyday gandhis* decided not to show violence in Liberia or the participation of their subjects in that violence. Instead, they highlighted the resilience of former child soldiers as they evolved into peacebuilders within their community. The purpose of this, according to the founder of *everyday gandhis*, was to challenge the valorization of violence in documentaries about peace and conflict (Niraula, 2015). Communities that experience conflict are not simply dark spaces but localities of resilience and the multitudes of people working for social change. There is room for filmmakers to explore these potentials and share their stories.

In the case of *everyday gandhis*, the filmmaker also found that being present among the community members, genuinely listening to their stories and respecting their decisions enabled her to gain their trust and encourage them to reorganize around their traditional practices of peacebuilding (Niraula, 2015). Continued conversations and engagement with local communities can help filmmakers offset their own biases and judgements and allow them to develop authentic relationships with members of the community. Building these relationships can help the filmmaker to better understand and document stories and to produce content that can serve as a record of knowledge and past experience.

6 Connecting with an Audience

In addition to expanding the narrative field and contextualizing portrayals of conflict, filmmakers can also contribute to the extensive body of peacebuilding knowledge by creating a visual record of experiences, stories and initiatives that can be shared with a larger audience or passed onto successive generations. By serving as a conduit between local experience and a wider audience, documentary films can inform the public about events on the ground, add to a deeper under-

standing of the dynamics and repercussions of conflict, and lead to more nuanced practice and scholarship. Creating a meaningful bridge between local experiences and the public requires documentarians to determine the film's target audience and how to convey stories while ensuring the safety and dignity of the film's participants.

When sharing other people's stories – particularly those of individuals who have survived traumatic events or are currently living in politically restricted contexts – it is important for filmmakers to uphold their responsibility to those who appear in the film. Witness, an organization that trains people to use video documentation for social change and human rights, suggests that one way to avoid putting subjects at risk is to “consult with someone sensitive to the social norms and security situation relevant to the community where the recording takes place to gauge the potential that sharing the footage would violate individual privacy or put people or communities at risk” (Witness, 2015). As mentioned earlier, verifying the film's content with those who participate can also make sure their dignity and privacy are protected.

Filmmakers also have a responsibility to their audience, as they need to ensure that the film's “curation is truthful, that it does not provide a platform for hateful views or malicious reports, and that it respects the emotional and psychological capacity of the audience” (Witness, 2015). In addition, the target audience plays an important role in determining the function of documentaries for building peace. An effective documentary demands the active engagement of its audience by challenging their way of thinking about “what they know and how they know it” as well as helping them think about “what more they might want to learn” (Bernard, 2011: 3). If presented honestly, documentaries can “compel viewers to consider and even care about topics and subjects they might have previously overlooked” (Bernard, 2011: 1). Those involved in the production of a documentary often hope to share their story with the widest number of people possible. For example, the ‘Future Guardians of Peace’ wanted to share their stories with a large audience in the hopes that their personal stories of healing would inspire others to heal and reconcile with themselves. The members of this initiative believed that their stories would convince audiences of the possibilities for healing irrespective of their social conditions (Niraula, 2015).

However, creating authentic content that avoids dramatic portrayals and artificial plotlines may impede a film's ability to reach a wide audience. Avoiding the conventional dramatic treatment of a story may inhibit a viewer's ability to discern the film's overall message. There is also the chance that an audience, lacking proper understanding of the context, will not find the story to be appealing. The film may not be selected for screening in film festivals, thereby limiting its outreach to a broader audience. Thus, a documentarian has to make an ethical choice related to narration and presentation style so that the film both protects the authenticity of the story and generates interest among its audience. It is a difficult call to make, and every filmmaker has the right to select a narrative process that best meets one's ethical needs. Depending on their stories and narrative style, documentaries may generate varied interest among different types of audi-

ences. It is important for a documentary maker to trust one's content and believe that it will find its own audience over a period of time.

Documentaries about issues of peace and conflict may find a better audience in academic settings, especially by targeting students, scholars and practitioners in peace studies. Engaging this type of audience in deeper conversations about peacebuilding may promote new perspectives and creative avenues for future work. The founder of *everyday gandhis*, for instance, hoped that their documentaries would engage academic audiences and policy makers to reflect on their role in contributing to the situation in Liberia (Niraula, 2015). In this regard, documentaries can bridge the gap between the local and global by providing a space for scholars and practitioners to explore universal themes of peace and conflict.

7 Conclusion

Stories have the power to inspire social change and political transformation by adding narrative plurality, contextualization and local expertise to our collective understanding of peace and conflict. By creating a platform to transmit these stories, documentary filmmakers can bridge the gap between scholarship and practice by creating a process where each realm mutually informs the other. Ensuring that this process contributes to peacebuilding in a way that is effective, sustainable and ethical requires filmmakers to be reflexive and attuned to certain challenges. According to Cynthia Travis from *everyday gandhis*:

The most important aspect of the documentary is the story. In order to address the message of peacebuilding through documentaries, special care should be taken to ensure that the story is honest and portrayed in the exact way that events unfold in a social setting. It has to be just to its subject. Special attention should be paid to the craft of the documentary. Otherwise, the documentary can create harm and conflict. (cited in Niraula, 2015: 54)

A common tendency among documentary filmmakers is to use dramatization or manipulative storytelling that imposes artificial plotlines or selects a single person to serve as the film's protagonist. This approach perpetuates the liberal peace model by failing to engage local expertise while also feeding into their distrust of outsiders. Rather than beginning a film project with a certain agenda or knowing beforehand what story they want to tell and how they want to tell it, filmmakers can build trust with the communities in which they work by using a participatory process that gives local community members ownership over the film and its direction.

Using an elicitive rather than a prescriptive approach to filmmaking can incorporate local knowledge and understanding about the conflict and allow both the participants and the filmmaker to clarify, learn and discover through a process of reflection and dialogue (Lederach, 1995). Contextualizing the conflict through sustained conversation with local communities and engagement with academic research can lead to more authentic stories, which can impact audiences

on a deeper level and influence their own actions towards social change. In addition to this, opening up a space that challenges hegemonic narratives by introducing marginalized or excluded voices into the broader societal discourse can inform our collective knowledge about peace and conflict. However, documentary filmmakers also have a responsibility to reflect on their own role in the peacebuilding process and take responsibility for the films they put into the world. This requires a careful balance between giving local communities ownership over the film without serving to reproduce harmful narratives or verifiably inaccurate information.

Anderson and Bergenfield suggest that “multimedia is a critical tool in the process of information integration because it can bridge access issues, illiteracy, and other barriers between local peacebuilding and research” (2014: 181). Through bearing witness to local experiences of conflict and peacebuilding, documentary filmmakers can use their medium to facilitate local healing and empowerment and to create a visual memoir of traditions and experiences that can be saved for future generations or shared with other communities working through their own processes of conflict transformation. Sharing these visual records of accumulated knowledge and experience with a wider audience – particularly those in educational settings – can bridge the gap between practice and scholarship in peace studies by putting the two in conversation and expanding the current models and frameworks used in peacebuilding.

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Dana Townsend & Kuldeep Niraula

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