

MARCH 2007

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# Thoughts on **the Internet,** **Film** and **Social Change**

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# Thoughts on the Internet, Film and Social Change

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The question today, for people who believe that social change can happen through documentary entertainment is not “How do I use the internet to promote my film?” but “How does my film promote an integrated internet campaign that will change society and influence policy?”

The internet is not just another component to be plugged in, it is the natural home base, the environment, from which smaller voices can engage and amplify limitlessly. Creating this online space that empowers your “evangelists,” provides inspiration for new audiences, makes information easy for the media to write about and deepens the documentary viewing experience is the best investment a filmmaker can possibly make. When done well, a film becomes a “viral marketing” piece—something passed from person to person—for an internet-based campaign and the emotion of the documentary can be harnessed for lasting change.

Of course, this is a fundamental shift for filmmakers who may see the internet as an alien medium, viral marketing as a fad and social networking as beyond comprehension. But these online tools represent the opportunity for the filmmaker to own the entire chain of production, distribution and campaign organizing, taking advantage of the sudden meritocracy of media that gives even the smallest film a chance to have major impact and gives filmmakers direct contact with their audiences.

The interaction between film and web presence (this includes everything from website to podcast to viral Flash movie), takes on two distinct forms. The first is the more traditional form we think of, that of promoting a film. In this “Promotional Flow”, the web presence creates new audiences for the film and encourages viewership. The second complementary, but even more powerful form extends beyond promotion and into campaign activism. This “Activation Flow” sees the film as a marketing piece for a campaign web presence where the web presence extends the experience of the film, promotes and sustains offline organizing and provides a centralized information distribution hub. In other words, the Activation Flow leverages the film to become the most visible component of a complete action-oriented campaign, to which the web is central.

## THE PROMOTIONAL FLOW

*There are two primary ways in which the internet can become an effective and promotional tool for a documentary film: The first is as a distribution channel, the second is as a viral peer-to-peer marketing tool.*

### Distribution Channel

Putting DVDs in the hands of every organizer, house party planner and potentially interested individual can be cost prohibitive. Thanks to greater penetration of broadband and Adobe’s Flash video technology (which has created a nearly universal viewing format), filmmakers can choose to distribute parts (or even all) of their film to internet audiences at a relatively high quality and low cost on the internet. Video sharing sites like YouTube have further broken down video streaming barriers by at once removing all hosting costs and providing instant networks of eager viewers.

Freeing films from their film canisters or DVD cases provides several promotional opportunities. The most conservative is for the filmmaker that sees the ultimate format of the product as the 90-minute movie and wants to promote the full version. This filmmaker will use the web to distribute (virtually for free), using a trailer with a strong draw to entice the audiences to a website where a full-length piece can be easily bought, or located locally. Ninety-second trailer spots of this type can then be distributed to targeted partners and video sharing sites. Links can also be emailed directly to affinity lists.

A more adventurous filmmaker may want to free the film even further from its native, full-length medium to reach different audiences. The filmmaker can ask “how can a short clip of this film, in its own way, drive the social justice objective in a complementary way to the full-length feature?” This filmmaker may cut several different targeted shorts for direct marketing (through partners, blogs and community sites) to audiences that might not otherwise be reached by the feature version. The implicit understanding is that these viewers may never see the entire film but, if the holistic web presence is strong, may still be activated to support the campaign goals.

An interesting example of this type of approach comes in the form of the promotion of the recent book *The Best War Ever*. The authors cut a short video, free from the form of the book itself and posted it on YouTube.

→ [http://youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qGAqA-muYU](http://youtube.com/watch?v=_qGAqA-muYU)

With virtually no marketing budget, the authors exposed more than 250,000 viewers to the direct message of the book. The idea was not to sell more books per se but to activate audiences around the same issues that the book promotes.

Another promotional example is Free Range's piece, *Backwards Hamburger*, that was used as an online marketing piece for the movie *Fast Food Nation*. In this piece, many of the issues relevant to the full-length movie were promoted in a humorous, animated short. The short was then hosted on its own campaign site and uploaded to Youtube for maximum visibility.

→ <http://www.backwardshamburger.com/>

### **Viral Peer-to-Peer Marketing**

The second way to leverage online promotion is through viral peer-to-peer marketing. Here the internet is used to “arm the choir,” rather than reach out to new audiences, so they are empowered to do the outreach for you. Any movie with a social or political message has its “evangelists.” These may be the people who are already passionate about the message and see the movie as their loudspeaker, or they may be those who were so inspired by the movie that they want to tell everyone they know about what they’ve just learned. In either case, the internet can harness this passion by allowing inspired viewers to do much more than simply tell their friends, “you’ve got to see this film.”

Internet tools like short pass-around video clips, “send a DVD to a friend” and downloadable house party DVD screening kits allow impassioned individuals to help grow the audiences far beyond their traditional reach. Sympathetic organizations behave similarly to impassioned individuals. These organizations may be motivated to spread the word for you through their own website, blog, email list, etc. Empowering them to do so with on line tools allows filmmakers to do so in a way that is simple, on-message and once set-up—free.

A good example of arming the choir comes from Free Range's viral hit, *The Meatrix*. Reaching out to a tiny list of impassioned individuals and organizations grew the clip's viewership from several hundred to over ten million with little distribution investment.

→ <http://www.meatrix.com>

## THE ACTIVATION FLOW

The Activation Flow works in concert with the Promotional Flow. It challenges us to see the film as a key component of a strategic internet campaign to make serious social change. It recognizes that the power of the film is to create an emotional engagement around an issue. The rest of the campaign nurtures and then engages that emotion, turning it into action.

The key first step in the Activation Flow is getting audiences off their couches or out of their theater seats and onto your website. As filmmakers we know the importance of character, human faces, sounds and emotions. These elements must continue seamlessly from the film to the website, drawing the viewer deeper into the story and ultimately encouraging him or her to become an active participant.

This can be achieved within the movie itself by allowing audiences to see that the story may feel complete but its ending is still being written and can be influenced by you the viewer. This goes far beyond tacking a url onto the end of the film. Strategies like offering special extras footage, not available on the DVD, offering interviews and webcasts from characters in the film, even adding web-exclusive epilogues will all draw people to the campaign site. Of course audiences garnered specifically online in the Promotional Flow are even easier to draw to your site because they can do so with the click of a button.

Once audiences have made the leap to explore the online campaign, they must be rewarded with a continuous-feeling narrative flow. The site cannot be simply a giant Take Action button (though this should by no means be buried). Instead, an effective campaign website must provide the following key tools and information, available at first glance:

- Opportunities to engage more deeply with the film's narrative
- Clear statement of the social issue(s) being addressed
- Clear actions the user can take to address these issues and info about successes achieved thus far
- Press kits and tools for those who seek to promote the film (including viral marketing tools)
- Film trailer
- Stakeholder-specific content and education tools (i.e. media, organizations, educators, policy makers)
- Offline organizing tools (when appropriate)
- Community Building tools (when appropriate)

There are enormous creative opportunities to leverage the emotional and narrative excitement within these structures. The film literally comes to life on the website as the user becomes part of the story. **Countless social action sites provide the ability to “Take Action” but campaigns that take advantage of a filmmaker’s knack for storytelling have a distinct advantage to create explosive buzz.**

Some sample creative ideas for extending the story on the site and encouraging action:

### **Character Biographies and Ongoing Life Narratives**

The web can go so much deeper than a film can as it is not constrained by time. Sites offer filmmakers the opportunity to give audiences the deeper backstories, thoughts and ongoing life dramas of the characters covered in their films. Users can even get premium access to interact with the characters by leaving messages on the site that the characters themselves will have access to and can even respond to.

Free Range explored this possibility with exciting success for ITVS at → [www.beyondthefire.net](http://www.beyondthefire.net).

Another example of online, interactive character exploration is Free Range’s soon to be launched project, Facing History:

→ <http://fho.freerangegraphics.com/>

Filmmakers with continued access to featured characters can even create interactive web casts and chats, offering premium access to committed viewers who are becoming activists. Creating deeper engagement around characters also ties in the opportunity to see the desired user actions as being done on behalf of an individual that the user can relate to, further leveraging the emotional power of film.

### **Organization-specific Campaign Homepages**

Creating long-lasting partnerships with key organizations requires deep commitment. And this commitment can be cultivated by giving organizations tools that will push their organizational agenda even as they push your shared issue agenda.

This year, Free Range created a biodiversity themed cartoon for Harvard Medical School (→ [www.diversitycode.com](http://www.diversitycode.com)) that sought to launch to 1,000,000 activists around the world. To achieve this, we did not go out and ask for organizational lists, offering nothing in return. Instead of asking for their lists, we *offered* the movie (a \$50,000 value) to each organization accompanied by a branded campaign site that the organization could claim as its own. A small up front investment allowed us to create a flexible template into which partner organizations could drop their logo and their specific action. This strategy brought in 9 partners and rocketed us past the launch goal. Further, it

created long-term engagement with each partner that benefited from the movie’s success.

This approach can be taken even further with a documentary film, by doing up front outreach to organizations to find out what information, tools and narratives would resonate most with their constituents. This information can be leveraged in the execution of the film, within a film’s online site, and on organization-specific pages.

### **Organization-specific Resources and Content**

Long-term social change requires more than educating an audience and urging them to take online action. A big challenge for social change movements is motivating people to make changes in their everyday lives, and often, this means moving them to organize offline. Films can be a powerful tool in long-term social change if they are delivered in collaboration with on-the-ground groups that are already engaged in the issues relevant to the film.

There are thousands of grass roots organizations that work on the ground on a daily basis to affect long-term social change. These groups can play an integral role in determining what actions, narratives, characters and stories should be presented on the website. These groups know best what will resonate with their audiences, what will inspire their evangelists, and what tools will enable them to accomplish their overall social change goals.

Providing content that seamlessly fits into their campaign goals and meets the needs of their audiences will create a network of audience members for the film and increase distribution, promotion and viral marketing potential. It also dramatically increases the potential for long-term social change as these are the groups that are moving within a larger social change movement and can leverage your film and the website in their existing social change efforts.

A good example of how content could be organization-specific is Active Voice’s work for *The New Americans* series. Dividing a film into different thematic chapters is a great way to meet the needs of a variety of immigration groups that focus their efforts on different components of an immigrant’s life (i.e. increasing civic participation, meeting the needs of immigrant families, etc.). Providing this thematic content in a multi-media fashion with supporting materials online would allow groups working in the immigration space the ability to see the film series and the website as part of their ongoing campaign efforts.

### **Online Community Building Tools**

When audiences are moved emotionally to take action, they want to feel a part of a larger movement. No one wants to feel like the issues they are facing are insurmountable or that they are alone in their fight for change. Integrating community building tools on a campaign site can be an important component of motivating people to take action

and keeping them engaged with the film's issues.

Community Building tools can be as simple as blogs, message boards or on-line forums where supporters can talk to each other, talk with the filmmaker, or interact with the organizations working within the social change space. Tools can also be interactive, engaging and visually compelling, giving people a clear sense of belonging to the film's narrative and messages.

Free Range has successfully developed two community building sites, both using a photo uploading tool, as part of larger action campaigns.

For the Human Rights Campaign, Free Range enabled people to upload their photo holding a card with a predetermined message, demonstrating their support for those facing the challenges of coming out to peers and family. The site was extremely successful for garnering support and media attention for National Coming Out Day.

→ <http://www.hrcsnapshot.org/>

Free Range recently developed a photo uploading tool as part of a healthy eating campaign for Annie's Homegrown. The campaign was centered on the viral marketing movie, *The Mouth Revolution* ([www.mouthrevolution.com](http://www.mouthrevolution.com)), and engaged viewers even further by allowing them to join the Revolution online. Supporters became part of the narrative as they uploaded their mouths and essentially became a character of the Mouth Revolution.

→ <http://mouthrevolution.com/gallery.php>

### Offline Guerilla Marketing Support

Getting viewers to take their emotional connection to a film's story and translate it into action often involves reinforcing a film's messages in a branded, experientially rich and creative way. This can effectively and cheaply be done online, but it can also be reinforced offline through guerilla marketing tactics. Bringing a film's messages offline into the context of audience's daily lives (where they live, work and play) can be a strong way to get that audience to a website. Guerilla marketing can reach key target audiences in the real world in new and unexpected ways.

Though viral flash movies are a form of online guerilla marketing, Free Range has also had experience with clients helping them make a splash on the streets and sidewalks with real-life disruptive, offline, guerilla efforts.

For example, a billboard truck that we designed for Amnesty International circled the Saudi Arabian embassy with an embarrassing image highlighting their human rights abuses. Soon after, Amnesty International was granted a meeting with key Saudi diplomats.

Another example of a successful guerilla marketing campaign that integrated both online and offline components is Free Range's Save Tenzin campaign for Students for a Free Tibet. In this campaign, Free Range developed a campaign strategy including a stencil design

that activists could download as a pdf and spray paint or chalk anywhere. Throughout 2004, thousands of these stencilings appeared around the world from Los Angeles to Rome to Katmandu. The Beastie Boys even got involved, donating their song "Sabotage", for an online video highlighting Tenzin stencils. In early 2005, the Chinese government mysteriously announced a pardon for Tenzin Delek. Students for a Free Tibet credits the Free Range campaign for making the impossible a reality.

→ [www.savetenzin.org](http://www.savetenzin.org)

## CONCLUSION

The way users are behaving on the internet has evolved tremendously over the last few years, and that evolution continues to accelerate. The rapid increase of what is called "Web 2.0," where users interact with, create and respond to content, offers exciting new opportunities to documentary filmmakers and social change activists.

The web is now a space full of potential evangelists, broadcasters, and supporters who can propel a documentary and its messages forward. Crafting a campaign strategy that reaches and arms these key audiences can be seen as a critical part of a documentary's effectiveness. Using a filmmaker's eye for character development, narrative structure and human emotion can be a guiding structure for moving an audience seamlessly from a film to a website, where they can be drawn deeper into the story and ultimately, towards powerful, real-world action.

# Strategy Map For An Integrated Action Campaign Built Around A Documentary Film

