

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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5. Collaboration

Making a documentary is an immersive experience. You are creating a truth into which you put your heart and soul. It can be lonely process, but it can also be a shared experience. In an increasingly digitally-driven world where filmmaking technologies are democratised, more affordable, and increasingly user friendly, and in a technological environment in which connectivity is the norm, working collaboratively is easier than ever before. Pop songs with multiple voices are produced without the artists meeting in the studio; individual recordings are made in smaller studios — often at home — and amalgamated on a computer somewhere else entirely. This is twenty-first-century media production. In the academy, such collaborative digital processes promise exciting new intellectual opportunities.

Working collaboratively is a wonderful thing. It provides multiple ideas, perspectives, visions, and skillsets, which can be explored using the specific grammatical opportunities offered by digital filmmaking. Working on a media project with a friend or colleague requires an additional level of planning, however. Your documentary-making collaborator may share a vision with you, but it is unlikely to be identical to your own. Before you pack up your equipment and head out on location you need to discuss, in an open and frank way, what it is that you are trying to achieve. This may seem like an obvious step in the process, but it is too easy to assume that you already share a cohesive vision when there are, in fact, problematic differences between what you and your partner(s) hope to achieve, and how you plan to achieve it. In a process as complicated and involved as documentary production, such divergent ideas can cause significant problems if they are not resolved in advance.

This applies not only to the overall vision for the film, but also to the finer details, such as the type of shots you need to capture. To that end, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where are you going?
- Do you need a crew; if so, how large will it be?
- How will creative and intellectual responsibilities for the project be divided?
- What mechanisms are in place to manage disagreements?

When we began working on *Looking for Charlie*, we had to develop clear roles which served the project. We both co-directed and co-wrote the film, but Darren was to serve as editor and Brett as the film's producer; roles that played to each of our strengths. We also had to ensure we were on the same intellectual page. To facilitate this, we exchanged reading lists and set aside time to discuss the literature surrounding our chosen topic (life in the silent era), working through our individual thoughts and developing a shared direction for the film. The work was based largely on research Darren had already carried out — but Brett offered new ideas and perspectives that would shape how the film would ultimately evolve and develop.



Fig. 8. Watch the trailer for *Looking for Charlie*. Scan the QR code or visit <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/2313fcf2>



In particular, our collaboration allowed us to explore more subjective, personal aspects of the film's core themes — depression and recovery. That would have been difficult for either of us to recognise or pursue as individuals, not least because we found the filmmaking process to be a type of catharsis during a very challenging period in both our lives. As friends, we were able to support each other; as collaborators, we were able to recognise how our own personal experiences reflected key themes in the film. The parallels between the film's subject matter and our own experiences created new discourses between us, some of which ultimately informed or appeared in the final film. What could have been a relatively simple documentary about life in the silent era, instead became a much more personal reflection on surviving depression as seen through an early filmic lens.

When you are choosing a subject for your film, choose something that is close to you, a part of you, and do not be scared to open yourself up to your audience — or to your collaborators. Professor Green's film about depression and suicide, *Suicide and Me* (2015) was made much more interesting and engaging thanks to his personal story about the loss of his father to suicide and his subsequent struggles with



Fig. 9. Shooting on location at Cirencester, behind the scenes at Gifford's Circus for *Looking for Charlie*. L-R, Darren R. Reid, Brett Sanders, and our subject for the day, Tweedy, a professional clown.

depression and search to understand his father's actions.¹ Do not be afraid of subjectivity; we cannot always detach ourselves from the issue we are documenting and an audio-visual grammar offers opportunities to explore such subjects beyond the framework typically provided by academic papers. Choosing one's collaborators should thus be done with care. Filmmaking can be a very personal and challenging process. Plot, plan, and communicate.

Unlike *Looking for Charlie*, *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided* (2016) started life with a clear sense of objective purpose. We would not indulge our own subjectivity. Instead, we sought to take the pulse of New York during a charged and contentious electoral cycle, soliciting the subjective views of ordinary Americans in a dispassionate and honest way. To achieve this, we worked to ensure that we had a clear, shared vision — rather than having our own story to tell, we would allow our subjects to lead the narrative. We were to be responsive to the story that New York wanted to tell.²

Regardless of what kind of film you intend to make, it is crucial that you organise yourself and your collaborators effectively. You will only have a limited amount of time in the field; you are limited by the battery life of your cameras, and by other factors such as light. If you have a large number of collaborators (a crew), organise them into smaller units with specific tasks. One team might be tasked with finding locations, another with shooting interstitial material, and so on. When making *Aftermath* we divided ourselves into units, which allowed us to run parallel tasks, maximising our time in the city. One team was responsible for filming our interviews, another looked after our interviewees, and another captured shots of the city. What would have taken a single unit three days could thus be accomplished in less than half that time.

This is where working collaboratively offers great advantages. Having a wider toolkit of skills, and personality types, is a key advantage to working as part of a team. On both *Looking for Charlie* and *Aftermath*, we, as co-directors and project leads, each brought skills and knowledge to the project, but we also had our crew's skills, knowledge,

1 *Professor Green: Suicide and Me*. Digital Stream. Directed by Adam Jessel. London: BBC, 2015.

2 *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*. Digital Stream. Directed by Brett Sanders and Darren R. Reid. Coventry: Red Something Media, 2016.

and enthusiasm to draw upon. Identifying the skills that you and those around you possess is really important. We recognised immediately which of us possessed a passion for design and which of us possessed an eye for detail. We knew what we wanted to achieve, shared a vision, and understood our individual strengths and weaknesses. As a result, we were able to work together in a complementary way. We shared writing and directorial responsibilities, but Darren served as editor, and Brett as lead producer.

Trust is the natural product of close and effective collaboration. When Darren made *Keepers of the Forest: A Tribe of the Rainforests of Brazil* (2019), Brett was an important part of that project's post-production process.³ The film had been made when an unexpected (and time-sensitive) opportunity presented itself, thus preventing full horizontal collaboration. Post-production, however, presented the opportunity for broader collaboration, with Brett ultimately serving as the film's executive producer and creative consultant. Modes of collaboration may vary, but effective partnerships should be maintained, nurtured, and utilised wherever possible.

Filmmaking creates opportunities to work with a wide range of potential collaborators, not just those who are responsible for the overall creative and intellectual integrity of a project. Every camera person, production assistant, or sound recordist is a collaborator, even if their contribution is focused and specialised. When making *Aftermath*, we combined the production process with a learning experience; our crew was comprised of undergraduate history students who were looking to broaden their CVs. We recognised that two of our crew possessed specific talents: one had an excellent eye for detail and for the framing of shots; the other had excellent people skills, as well as a good technical understanding of the camera equipment. As a result they were each given the role of Assistant Director, and throughout that project each was delegated tasks that best reflected their abilities. As we filmed interviews in Harlem and Wall Street, for instance, we were able to dispatch one unit, under the direction of the relevant Assistant Director, to find interesting shots that we could use to lead our audience through our portrait of New York.

3 *Keepers of the Forest: A Tribe of the Rainforests of Brazil*. Directed by Darren R. Reid. Coventry: Studio Académie, 2019.

Welikewise invited the rest of our students to think about the remaining roles available and where their own skillsets lay — interviewing, fixing, sound recording, and filming. This allowed us to place people in the most appropriate roles, harnessing organic enthusiasm and pre-existing skillsets. Self-confident members of the crew approached New Yorkers, asking them if they wanted to take part in our project, whilst others interviewed them, recorded sound, operated cameras, and so on. As the shoot progressed, we provided opportunities for crew members to experience different roles before settling into positions that reflected their core strengths. As a confidence-building exercise, this helped to reinforce their strengths.

Our crew ultimately settled into the following structure:

- Co-Directors x 2 (Brett and Darren).
- Assistant Directors x 2.
- Fixers x2 [Members of the crew responsible for carrying out whatever minor tasks are required by the directors].
- Interviewers x 4.
- Camera operators x 8.

Once we had wrapped up the shoot and returned home, we were able to start the process of assembling our footage. In all of our projects we spent hours watching raw footage, a tedious but essential part of the filmmaking process. Clear your diary of a day, or days, buy junk food, and prepare to settle in. For every hour of footage we produced and watched, we used perhaps 10% of it in the final cut. Whilst the end product will look polished, professional, and glamorous, the process is often less so. Trawling through your footage is the least stimulating part of the process — planning is fun and imaginative, as is story-boarding. Filming on location is also an amazing experience. Not so trawling through hours of interstitial material, looking for *that* five seconds of footage. Still, with a collaborator the process was somewhat more creative than it otherwise might have been; an informative intellectual discourse can emerge even during tedious tasks.

Remember to organise your recorded material well. Failing to do that will make this part of the process incredibly difficult.⁴ Having said

4 Barry Hampe, *Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), pp. 279–83.

that, this is also the part of the process where some element of your production's truth is realised. In *Looking for Charlie* we were using film to revive the memories of two largely forgotten comedians. We gave them a voice, and highlighted their significance to the world that had forgotten them. In *Aftermath* we gave a voice to New Yorkers who were, at that time, trying to understand what it meant to be an American in the era of Donald Trump. In our current project, *Signals: Scotland and the North Sea*, we are only just discovering the truths held by our material. Watch your material together; just as you plan and execute the capture of your footage together. Make every part of the process a collaborative exchange and you will create a framework in which you will consistently discover (and build upon) new ideas.

Working collaboratively is an exciting proposition — you share skills, adventures, and tasks. Our filmography is the result of our love of collaboration. We would not have captured as much footage, or as many interviews, if we had worked independently. Nor would we, particularly with *Looking for Charlie*, have been able to realise a project that became so large. It consumed more than three years of our lives, shooting in half a dozen major locations spread across three continents. Mutual support kept us going at times when, as individuals, we almost certainly would have given up or settled on something far less ambitious.

Collaboration, then, can help you to create intellectual and narrative studies of far greater scope than you might otherwise be able to accomplish on your own.

