

Field Report: "Why Democracy?"

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This is the third in a series of "field reports" that the Center for Social Media is producing as part of the Future of Public Media project, funded by the Ford Foundation. The field reports examine innovative media projects for public knowledge and action, with a particular interest in exploring how publics form around such projects.

Center for Social Media Research Fellow Greg Fitzpatrick's examination of "Why Democracy?"—an ambitious multi-platform, multi-country public broadcasting project—demonstrates the opportunities and challenges for public media born in a broadcasting environment to engage publics across global and digital divides.

Both social media tools and online broadcast platforms have lowered the barriers for collaborative media experiments, facilitating the rapid creation of networks of producers, distributors and publics. Like any tool, however, they must be wielded with skill and foresight to function well. While the "Why Democracy?" project succeeded in its primary goal of coordinating a series of international broadcast events, it achieved more modest results in using the digital social networking space to host a critical discussion about public issues. In the pseudo-public sphere of public broadcasting, it achieved recognition for powerful and evocative programming, but in the emerging DIY public sphere of participatory digital media—social networking with content—it registered a much smaller effect.

Intended to be a "prototype for international multimedia events," this experiment in global production and outreach offers valuable lessons for filmmakers, broadcasters, and civil society organizations aiming to inform and mobilize publics through media. Limited resources, lack of social media expertise, unclear objectives, and the difficulties of cross-cultural coordinating all hampered the capabilities of "Why Democracy?" organizers to foster sustained public engagement during the initial broadcast push. However, post-broadcast efforts continue.

Field Report: "Why Democracy?"

Briefing

Launched in October 2007 and largely completed by June 2008, ["Why Democracy?"](#) [1] is an international project collaboratively executed by a group of public service broadcasters and documentary film producers. Organizers developed online and offline partnerships to bring people together as members of self-defined publics to engage in dialogue about a topic that spans cultural and national boundaries. The project built on an earlier collaboration among European and South African producers, which created more than three dozen documentaries aired by more than 25 broadcasters, and was used to educate audiences throughout southern Africa about HIV/AIDS through mobile cinemas and facilitated discussions.

"Why Democracy?" was designed to launch an international conversation about what producers and publics defined as "democratic issues" on a platform of 10 full-length documentary films (mostly broadcast on public service TV systems in 180 countries) and 18 short films (mostly available on the Web). The 10 full-length films were produced by filmmakers from Denmark, Japan, Pakistan, Egypt, Russia, India, Liberia, Bolivia, China, and the United States (see Appendix I, below). The short films included work from Kenya, South Africa, United Kingdom, Iran, Nepal, Italy, Democratic Republic of

the Congo, Cuba, Spain, India, Russia, Croatia, and Pakistan.

The project promoted itself as the "largest ever factual media event," with television broadcasts around the world coordinated for one week in October 2007. The broadcasts were supported by a project website and presence on social networking sites Facebook and [MySpace](#) [2] as well as sites that promote user-generated content like [YouTube](#) [3] and [Flickr](#) [4]. Organizers also experimented with other Web 2.0 tools and features to facilitate the global conversation about democracy sparked by the content of the films.

Background and mission

In 2004, a small group of mostly-European commissioning editors and producers registered a non-governmental organization in Denmark called Steps International to commission a series of documentary films that would ask questions about contemporary forms of democracy. The group had just completed the highly acclaimed "Steps for the Future" project, managed by an organization called Steps Southern Africa, which commissioned 38 films on HIV/AIDS from seven different countries throughout southern Africa. Those films were collaboratively produced by African and international filmmakers, broadcasters, civil society organizations and people living with HIV/AIDS. They were used for mainly non-broadcast purposes to raise awareness of the disease among targeted local audiences through mobile cinemas and facilitated discussions.

Steps International intended to create a much wider global debate about democracy through a series of films that would reflect the experience of democracy in various settings and would be broadcast worldwide. South African filmmaker and activist Don Edkins and Danish filmmaker Mette Heide were the executive producers, and also served as the official Steps International staff, with Edkins in a full-time role from South Africa, and Heide as a half-time staff member operating out of Copenhagen. Other project principals included series editors Nick Fraser, commissioning editor of BBC's "Storyville" documentary series, Mette Hoffmann Meyer, editor of documentaries and head of co-productions at the Danish public broadcaster, DR, and Iikka Vehkalahti, commissioning editor of documentaries for Finland's YLE TV 2. Christoph Jorg, from Arte France, and Hans Robert Eisenhauer, from Germany's ZDF/Arte, were also listed as commissioning editors for the project.

These European public broadcasters initially failed to find a U.S. partner, but later connected with the Independent Television Service (ITVS), a production entity within U.S. public broadcasting dedicated to providing innovative programming for underserved audiences. ITVS agreed to air several of the films as part of its "Independent Lens" documentary film series, which is carried by most public broadcasting stations throughout the U.S.

The group chose the theme of democracy, hoping, as Mette Hoffmann Meyer [described it](#) [5], to "go into more fundamental themes" that would ensure that the series "could be expected to have a long life." However, they steadfastly refused to define the term "democracy," encouraging proposals that would fill a large theme with local content. Proposals were initially solicited through an open call in late 2004, publicized through "pitching" sessions at film festivals, postings on film information websites, through organizer's professional networks, and film organizations. After failing to achieve geographic diversity in the initial round of submissions, they scheduled meetings with filmmakers in targeted cities, including Mumbai, Beijing, Tokyo, Doha, and Cape Town. The group even encouraged proposals that took an antagonistic view of democracy; Fraser openly hoped to shake up "boring" liberal consensus that he saw as typical of European public service broadcasting. This was easier said than done. For example, Fraser described a "catastrophic meeting" sponsored by Al Jazeera in Doha, where state broadcasters charged that the group was trying to push a specific pro-Western agenda.

The commissioning process spanned the globe and attempted to attract filmmakers who represented a wide range of cultural backgrounds. While the open calls welcomed proposals from any country, there were obstacles to attracting the diversity and quality wished for by the project organizers. In countries without an established documentary tradition or network, the group had to find alternative ways to encourage submissions. Chinese meetings were conducted over three days in a Beijing hotel without the government's knowledge. Group members invited Indian filmmakers to meet with them

in workshops held in Mumbai and Kolkata (Calcutta). Fraser described a meeting with London producers marked by cynicism, and recalled being asked at pitches whether the group practiced democratic methods in choosing the films. In an [article in Prospect magazine](#) [6] he acknowledged the group did not make decisions by majority vote, partly because "the old anti-democratic habits of editorial individualism die hard" and noted frustration over his "own lack of political skills" as some meetings descended into "procedural wrangling."

Rumors spread among filmmakers in Europe and the U.S. that the pitch process was biased, with the commissioning editors having their secret favorites. Despite this, the organizers insist that decisions were made by consensus, with a reading group making initial recommendations and informing filmmakers of their decisions. In all, Steps International received more than 600 proposals representing more than 50 countries and chose 20 films for development, half of which were produced for broadcast in October 2007. In addition, 18 short films were commissioned for the project from approximately 200 proposals using similar methods. Steps International recruited 12 of these final 18 young and less-experienced directors for the short films from the Berlinale Talent Campus.

The 10 full-length documentary filmmakers were generally award-winning, experienced and well-established journalists, producers, and directors. They included Alex Gibney, an Oscar Award-nominated American director whose "Why Democracy" film *Taxi to the Darkside* eventually won its own Oscar; Karsten Kjaer, a Danish journalist with more than 200 television programs to his credit, and Nino Kirtadze, a former consultant to the president of the Republic of Georgia. At least one director or producer from each film was either born or raised in the country examined in the film. At least seven of the filmmakers had previous significant educational or professional experience in Europe or the United States.

Steps International partnered with 48 broadcasters that reached more than 180 countries, representing every major region of the world except China and Russia. The group's original goal was to enlist 30 broadcasters to air all 10 films during the same week in October 2007. In the end, 39 broadcasters each aired 10 full-length films, another five aired five or more films, and four broadcasters aired less than five films. The airtime and promotion efforts dedicated to the project varied widely by broadcaster.

The non-broadcast outreach efforts were focused through a website hosted at whydemocracy.net, which offered discussion forums, a library of resources about democracy, and polls that allowed users to vote for "President of the world." Visitors were also prompted to answer 10 questions about democracy, with each question corresponding to one of the films (See Appendix I for the questions).

In June 2007, primary responsibility for the site was turned over to a group of college-age people who lived in a "Democracy House" in Cape Town from June to October 2007—ultimately, four Europeans, two locals from Cape Town, and one person each from Brazil, Nigeria, Canada, China, India, and Singapore. The house members came from a range of professional and academic backgrounds, including journalism, human rights, filmmaking and international studies.

"Why Democracy?" profiles and groups were created on YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, and Writerscave, and the house members maintained a blog at whydemocracyhouse.blogspot.com that recorded their work in relation to the project and their leisure activities. The Democracy House team added interactive features to the "Why Democracy?" website, such as enabling comments from visitors and inviting popular bloggers to guest blog on the site for a day throughout October. During this period, they requested that bloggers redirect traffic from their site to whydemocracy.net. This proved to be an effective method of increasing traffic and interest in the project, but was implemented late in the project timeline.

The 13 guest bloggers on the site in October included former U.S. Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich; Sokwanele, the civic group that maintains the underground political blog, "This is Zimbabwe"; Jesse Brown, a Canadian broadcast journalist; Atanu Dey, an Indian economist; Kazuhiro Soda, director of "Campaign! The Kawasaki Candidate;" Parvez Sharma, an American filmmaker; Ory Okolloh, a lawyer in Kenya; Watson Meng, editor of the Chinese news website Boxun.com; Lalit Vachani, director of "In Search of Gandhi;" Olav Anders, a media scholar from Norway; Sean, a popular Russian blogger who

posts at seansrussiablog.org; David Roberts, an American environmental journalist; and Jim Schultz, a policymaker in Bolivia.

Funding Model

"Why Democracy?" cost \$5 million (around \$7.9 million USD), of which \$4 million was covered by Steps International. However, much of the funding was dependent on broadcast partners agreeing to sign on to the project after production of the films had begun, which created crises in production. Funding partners for individual films covered the remaining funding. The overwhelming bulk of the budget went to production, with only \$150,000—less than 4 percent of the budget—earmarked for website and marketing costs. Public broadcasters, especially Europeans, provided 81 percent of the funding, which did not include in-kind contributions.

European cultural foundations and government-sponsored entities, including Finland's VIKES Foundation, Danida, the Danish Film Institute, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam's Jan Vrijman Fund, the German Goethe Institut, and the German Federal Agency for Civic Education contributed nearly 16 percent of the budget. U.S. funding from the Ford Foundation and the Sundance Institute constituted 3 percent of the budget.

Project Partners

The core organizers, European and South African public broadcasters, reached out to other public broadcasters, and also established a relationship with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), with 75 member broadcasters from 56 countries in and around Europe. The EBU provided a loan of \$75,000 for development of films in the early stages of the project, and continued to be a major supporter by enlisting primarily Eastern European broadcasters as partners.

Civil society partnerships were harder to establish. In 2005, the project organizers compiled a list of more than 70 civil society organizations around the world focused on human rights and democracy as potential partners for the project. The list included organizations like the Open Society Institute, Westminster Foundation, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Democracy Coalition Project, Justice Africa, The Arab NGO Network for Development, Afghans for Civil Society, Israel Democracy Institute, and the Asian Human Rights Commission among many others. In June 2007, Democracy House members began contacting these organizations with minimal results. This is most likely due to the fact that the house members were essentially cold-calling these organizations, with no internal policy of how and when to follow up, or specific ways for them to get involved. Some organizations did include mentions of the project in their newsletter and website listings, and provided resources or links to be included in the Democracy House "Library" hosted at whydemocracy.net. Other organizations have been targeted to participate in the later stages of offline outreach for the project.

Democracy House staffers also e-mailed nearly 200 universities in August 2007 to recruit student facilitators for on-campus screenings. In the end, 18 universities in Europe, the U.S., Africa, Latin America and Asia held screenings of some of the films, followed by facilitated discussions about the main themes of the films and democracy-related issues. Many of the students who facilitated these screenings already had close connections to the project, and others had difficulty arranging the screenings because of the tight timeframe between August and October. The screenings that did occur varied greatly in their attendance, but resulted in high-quality discussions about the films that were screened.

The major online partner was MySpace, which helped advertise the project on its site, and debuted a special 10-minute version of the Chinese film *Please Vote for Me* as an online premiere. Attempts were made to involve administrators of popular groups on Facebook in the hope they would attract other users to the project, but these were largely unsuccessful due to the lack of perceived benefit for the group administrators. The house members made similar attempts to "partner" with users on MySpace and YouTube by adding like-minded users and content contributors as favorites or friends, but this also resulted in little tangible benefit. Much greater response was received from the guest bloggers, several of whom wrote for larger organizations such as Guardian Blogs and Burmanet.

According to House members, bloggers generally responded personally and enthusiastically to requests for their participation, though not all of them were able to contribute for various reasons.

Broadcasts were supported in print through a partnership with the Metro International newspapers, which reach nearly 19 million readers, typically young professionals, in 19 countries in Europe, North and South America, and Asia. During the week of broadcasts in October, *Metro* printed a series of interviews with key public figures asking them the project's "10 Questions about Democracy." A later partnership with The Observer in the UK arranged for these questions to be examined in depth through these same interviews as well as editorial pieces, and a number of newspapers in South Africa also ran the questions.

With only one full-time person on the Steps International staff, the most common challenge for these partnerships was a lack of organizational resources on the part of the "Why Democracy?" crew, whether in the Democracy House or at the higher strategic levels. Many proposed partnerships did not get off the ground because of lack of resources, planning, funding, deliverables, and poor timing.

Impact and Public Engagement

Broadcasts

The main goal of the project was to spur meaningful conversations about democracy through the television broadcasts, though this proved to be highly dependent on the level of promotional and outreach support provided by each broadcaster. The most comprehensive support came from the BBC, which made "Why Democracy?" the center of publicity for its new television season and developed its own complementary programming. "Why Democracy?"-related programming aired on BBC 2, BBC 4, BBC World, and BBC Parliament, while BBC World Service aired radio versions. With its reach into 180 countries, BBC World was an integral part of the broadcast partnership. The BBC's Appreciation Index (AI) gauges audience response (rather than audience size) for specific programs by scoring them on a 100-point scale based on surveys of a few thousand people. Scores vary by program genre, but a score around 70 is average for an entertainment drama. *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Please Vote for Me* each received astounding AI scores of 90 for their broadcasts on BBC 2, suggesting that audiences appreciated the quality of those two films. BBC Parliament's two "Democracy Evenings," during which it aired all the films, accounted for some of the highest ratings for the project across all the BBC channels, with an estimated 60,000 viewers the first evening and 80,000 the next.

Another active broadcaster was Canal Futura in Brazil, which is a private educational television network associated with the largest commercial television network's foundation. Canal Futura has a regular audience of approximately 33 million and a large network of partnerships with social institutions and universities. The broadcaster aired the films over two weeks, and made "Why Democracy?" a main theme for its program season, with customized promotion and related programs planned throughout 2008, as well as off-air discussion forums and outreach activities through partner institutions and universities.

In the Netherlands, the umbrella public broadcaster arranged a theme week called "We are the Boss" across all five major public broadcasters. This theme week included special programs created by each broadcaster to complement the films. Other smaller broadcasters also participated with some of their own programming, and Radio Netherlands Worldwide (RNW) hosted a special Dutch-language Internet channel that aired 24 hours a day for the premiere week in October, featuring live broadcasts and archive material on the theme of democracy. RNW also hosted programs and web stories in four languages. A total of 52 programs aired during the democracy week on Netherlands public broadcasting television channels. The broadcaster reported that the programs mainly reached an audience of viewers aged 50 and above, and it received a general market share of 6.4%. There was some sense that the audience grew tired of the democracy theme by the sixth night. Additionally in Europe, the German and French cultural channel ARTE screened all the films in dedicated primetime slots over 10 days.

Steps International largely achieved its primary objective of worldwide broadcast coverage for its

programs, although in many places the films were carried in late-night slots and were not incorporated into additional outreach efforts. The films were shown in 180 countries, and carried by 48 broadcasters, including a U.S. broadcaster. Most of the participating broadcasters were concentrated in Western and Eastern Europe, and the films were not carried by broadcasters in Russia or China, even though these regions were represented among the films. The broadcasters who reported the most audience response were able to invest considerable resources into local marketing and outreach, making broadcast partner follow-through an important factor in perceived success of the project. One of the common obstacles to broadcaster support was the late delivery of the films by Steps International, which limited the time period for promotion. A number of broadcasters still intend to participate in future outreach efforts, including the U.S.-based ITVS.

Film Festivals, Honors, and Awards

Several films received honors and awards at film festivals around the world. Among the highlights, *Please Vote for Me* won the 2007 Silverdocs Sterling Feature Award, and was placed on the 2008 Academy Awards Documentary Shortlist. It also won the Danish TV Oscar and best documentary honors at several festivals, as well as the Working Films Full Frame Award. *Taxi to the Dark Side* won the 2008 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, and Best Documentary awards from the 2007 Chicago Film Festival, Newport International Film Festival, and Tribeca Film Festival as well as a Peabody Award. The Russian film *For God, Tsar and the Fatherland*, by Nino Kirtadze, was awarded Best Documentary Director at Sundance, and *Iron Ladies of Liberia* won Best Political Documentary and Best Documentary at the Banff World Television Festival, and the MDGs Award at the One World Media Awards in the U.K. The "Why Democracy?" project was nominated for the Adolf Grimme TV Prize in Germany, and at the One World Media Awards U.K. for its website. Smaller and more targeted film festivals worldwide also featured the films, although rarely associated with the project. The exception was Berlinale in February 2008, which premiered eight of the project's short films under the title "Why Democracy?"

Press Coverage/Publicity

While press coverage was extensive, there was often a disjuncture between individual films and the overall project. The exception was in South Africa, where journalists were keenly aware of the connection the films, particularly *Taxi to the Darkside*, had to executive producer and South African Don Edkins. UK coverage largely focused on the project as an initiative created and broadcast by the BBC, rather than as an international collaboration. The partnerships with Metro Newspapers in Europe did bring the 10 questions into journalistic focus. Temporary press personnel were added to the staff at key periods or for specific events to help generate press coverage, and experienced moderate success.

Whydemocracy.net

Online public engagement on whydemocracy.net was modest, dispersed and evanescent, largely clustered around broadcast airdates. More than 110 total discussion threads were created on the whydemocracy.net forums by the end of April 2008, with a total of more than 1,700 comments. The most active of the forums contained around 100 distinct comments each over a 6-7 month period, with the vast majority of the comments posted immediately following the global broadcast in October. Discourse was typically of a serious nature and a rather surprising level of sophistication. One thread even resulted in the formation of a Yahoo group, however the conversation never picked up again. There were similar participation levels for voting in the polls on the site, though the authenticity of the responses was questionable. For example, the top two vote getters for "President of the world" were Vladimir Putin (44%) and cartoon character Lisa Simpson (36%).

The majority of blog postings on whydemocracy.net attracted no comments, with a couple of the most popular posts drawing no more than 10 comments. While it is not unusual for blog postings to receive little commentary, the guest bloggers seemed to spark a higher, albeit still modest, level of discussion and reaction. This suggests the potential positive impact of the guest bloggers on public engagement, although organizers were disappointed that cross-promotion between blogger sites and the "Why Democracy?" site was not as consistent or effective as originally hoped. The top referrers to the whydemocracy.net site during this time were the BBC and the blog of Stanley Fish.

The overall traffic peaked at a high of 70,709 unique visitors in the month of October, with nearly 4 million total page views during the entire month. Daily unique visitors spiked at 7,605 on October 8, and leveled off to the range of 4,000 to 5,000 daily unique visitors the rest of the month. The project organizers concede these numbers are not high in the grand scheme of Internet traffic, but a more important gauge for the purpose of the project is how long people stayed and what they did while visiting. The average visit duration during October was over seven minutes, indicating that the "sticky" elements like videos, polls and discussion forums may have been effective at keeping the attention of visitors. The available stats make it difficult to determine exactly what visitors did during their visits, but this duration, combined with the sporadic nature of forum postings, might suggest that visitors went to the site to learn more about the project and perhaps watch the short films. The number of unique visitors dropped to 22,000 in November and the total bandwidth activity fell from 725 GB to 207 GB.

These traffic stats for the "Why Democracy" site are best examined in terms of how traffic to the site fluctuated within the project timeframe rather than compared to other websites, since comparisons with other sites are problematic at best. (A complete explanation of the Alexa Traffic Ranking methodology can be found [on the Alexa site](#). [7]) While the "Why Democracy?" site met its initial intention of serving as an informational resource for the broadcast event, these measurements do not indicate signs of a "long tail" of sustained activity or robust discussion beyond the target broadcast period. The site received an average of 18,000 unique visitors per month from December to June 2008, but not a significant increase in discussion forum postings or other signs of discussion and interaction. The project organizers feel that having the project hosted by a major search engine or provider, like Google, could have boosted traffic to the site but they saw the Democracy House as an "inspired alternative" under the circumstances of their limited resources.

Online Social Media Outreach

Other social media spaces also had modest, if any, real pickup. Typical of these venues, they mostly elicited brief and shallow (though positive) comments about the films and the project rather than sustained dialogue about major themes. The main "Why Democracy?" channel on MySpace TV (not individual film pages) had received 119,547 total plays and 79 subscribers by June 2008. To put this in perspective, one of the top channels among the MySpace Partners is National Geographic, which was listed on the site as having more than 10 million views among all its videos during May 2008 alone. MySpace's promotion of *Please Vote for Me* resulted in more than 40,000 views during the month of October. That is a respectable one-month number that would place it typically within the top 600-700 videos in a given month, but it is a far cry from the more than 1 million plays the most popular videos are capable of attracting in less than a month. It also did not have much staying power, with only approximately 4,000 views between November 2007 and May 2008. The most popular video on the project's MySpace page, with more than 50,000 total plays as of June 2008, featured Lars Ulrich, drummer for Metallica, answering the 10 questions about democracy.

The rest of the pages on social media sites received very little to moderate responses or interactions from users of the sites. The Facebook group attracted more than 800 members, however efforts to connect with users and administrators of popular groups did not provide measurable results. The project's YouTube page featured a number of short scenes from the films, which did not receive a substantial number of views, save for scenes from *Dinner with the President*, which likely benefited from Pakistan's presence in global headlines for a period of time during the project's initial broadcast stage. The "Why Democracy?" channel on YouTube received more than 100,000 total video views spread among almost 60 videos by June 2008, which places it in the top 100-200 nonprofit channels on the site. The pages on Flickr, Writer's Café, and the blog on Blogspot generated small scale activity. For example, the Flickr group featured a little more than 450 photos and 70 members as of June 2008.

Obstacles

Funding

Funding problems presented constant obstacles for the project, since a majority of the budget came from broadcasters who signed on at different phases, leaving the bottom line in flux. In January 2007 the project was put in jeopardy by a cash crisis, eased by a European broadcaster's timely payment. The extremely limited budget for global marketing inspired the organizers to come up with the idea of the Democracy House to lead online outreach for the project, which was delayed until four months before the October broadcast due to funding constraints. Similarly, the short films were not fully funded until a few months before the October broadcasts. With only one full-time staff member, key project elements like online and offline partnerships with nonprofits, NGOs, civil society organizations and bloggers were not managed as carefully as needed. This lack of advance funding led to shortened timelines for project deliverables, which became a major distraction for the small Steps International staff in Cape Town as the broadcast deadline drew near.

Project Strategy and Communication

The project faced several predictable obstacles in international collaboration, some of which were creatively managed and others which limited the potential outcomes of the project. Though pleased overall with the international scope of the project, several of the short film directors commented in a Steps internal survey that the lack of face-to-face communication was a frustrating obstacle and led to confusion over deadlines and other production issues. This is due in large part to the fact that funding for the short films was secured in June 2007, allowing only about three months for their production and limiting opportunities for extended contact. As a result, many of these directors were unaware of the other aspects of the project, such as the online outreach. Project organizers dealt with this problem as well as possible through the use of online collaborative tools like YouSendIt, but there is little doubt this process would have run much more smoothly if the funding had been secured in advance and the filmmakers given a larger timeframe to work within. For example, the directors of the full-length films were more aware of the overall design of the project and more satisfied with the process possibly due to the longer and more coordinated timeframe for their projects.

Similarly, despite its close physical proximity to the main project coordinating office in Cape Town, members of the Democracy House expressed frustration about what they perceived as a lack of communication and direction from project principals. There were indications that house members were not entirely clear on their objectives, felt they lacked the tools to accomplish their goals, and were largely left to their own to determine and execute the outreach strategy, sometimes without the connections or experience to do so. This points once more to a lack of available resources, as Steps International was not able to hire a full-time and experienced project manager to coordinate specific elements of the offline and online outreach strategies and communicate with project principals.

The project was impressive in its ability to coordinate multiple broadcasters around an international broadcast event, but some obstacles proved too difficult to overcome in the coordination of program carriage and promotion. In addition to struggling to find a U.S. broadcaster, Steps International relied primarily on the reach of European broadcasters and the South African Broadcasting Corporation for carriage in African countries. The films did receive air time in 20 countries in and around the Middle East through Al-Arabiya, based in Dubai, and IBA in Israel, and ITVS picked up a couple of films for its *Independent Lens* series, which is carried by most PBS stations in the U.S. However, outside of the largest broadcasters, carriage was not coordinated around the broadcast week, and expectations for air times and promotional support were not understood clearly. Furthermore, local publicity and press coverage often focused on the broadcast of individual films rather than the larger international collaboration.

Production Delays and Unclear Outreach Strategies

Outreach, especially online, lacked early planning and focus, although certain tools and strategies proved useful through trial and error in the development of the project. Until the arrival of the house members, the website was static, with basic information about the films, the project, and updates of the broadcast dates and times. Few of the house members had much experience in promotion in general and online tools in particular. Basic features— such as archiving blog and news posts, and allowing visitors to comment and link to posts or share them on Facebook or social bookmarking

sites—were not included in the original site design, but added later by members of the Democracy House. Advanced tools like widgets, embeddable video, and other interactive applications were not considered until after the initial broadcast stage of the project, and thus missed the opportunity to capitalize on the peak period of project publicity.

Elements like the discussion forums were originally intended by project organizers to go live when the material became available in coordination with the broadcast week. This reflects a common misconception that online initiatives and interactive elements do not need as much lead time as offline outreach efforts. While these tools may be more versatile, allowing for later adjustments, online outreach professionals note that it can take a year or more to build momentum for an online social outreach campaign to show measurable results.

Production delays and a lack of clear guidelines also affected publicity and outreach, as some organizations were eager to assist but needed clear guidance and project materials to distribute. Many of the efforts of the Democracy House to post videos and encourage participation and support from bloggers and civil society organizations were held up by the late delivery of the films or the fact the films were only available with English subtitles.

Next Steps

The next phase of the "Why Democracy?" project is a traditional outreach initiative modeled on the format that proved successful in the "Steps for the Future" program. The films will be dubbed in various languages for facilitated screenings with guided discussions to take place initially throughout Africa. Depending on available funding, this outreach strategy will be extended to Central and South America, and South Asia. These screenings will be conducted in partnership with local organizations and institutions working on issues of democracy, human rights, and other related topics. The website is going to continue to play a central role in disseminating information and attempting to serve as an interactive space for dialogue. A guide for facilitators is being developed for use with the films. Initial funding pledges are earmarked for a multi-language DVD edition for African countries, and a school edition for all South African high schools. This will take place as the first phase to last through June 2009. Future outreach phases will be dependent on available resources.

Lessons Learned

Nurture Relationships and Partnerships in Advance

Capitalize on partnerships by establishing them early among a key group of partners with clearly defined expectations. The "Why Democracy?" organizers did a remarkable job of recruiting a wide range of broadcast partners, but these broadcasters "bought in" to the project at widely varying levels and at different stages of the project. This greatly affected the budget and limited the promotional reach of the project in specific regions and countries. The organizers also identified many potential partnerships with civil society organizations and NGOs early in the planning stages, but due to lack of resources did not aggressively pursue these partnerships until late in the project timeline and did not have clear plans for their participation. These partnerships are intended to play a key role in later outreach efforts to areas with limited online access, which is an important consideration. However, these civil society organizations are also increasingly building connections with online networks of supporters and engaged publics that could have been creatively tapped into for the main portion of the project. Attempts at online partnerships were rushed, with potential connections missed or incomplete due to a lack of advanced planning and implementation. To achieve maximum reach and influence, a project of this scope, especially with limited resources, requires a thorough understanding of the capabilities of each offline and online partner to share the burden of the project at various levels of participation and a strategic outreach plan to coordinate these activities.

Define Measures of Success and Desired Outcomes

The "Why Democracy?" project succeeded well in its primary goal of generating new programming

that reached far beyond the cloistered atmosphere of European public service broadcasting. It surpassed its original goal of full carriage by 30 broadcasters by having all 10 main films aired on 39 broadcasters. It also broke ground in getting broadcasters from the East, like NHK in Japan, to participate in an international co-production in new and collaborative ways. However, its more ambitious goal of turning these viewings into critical discussions about main themes surrounding democracy was intentionally left vague without measurable targets or definitions. This was intended as a way to allow the discussion room to breathe, but also led to a somewhat aimless strategy for public engagement. This demonstrates the need to use tools of engagement, whether offline or online, appropriately and integrally. The organizers have shown through past projects they are adept at effectively using offline outreach methods like mobile cinemas and facilitated discussions to achieve goals of engagement. New media tools also require a consideration of specific goals as they can serve a wide range of purposes. Some social networking sites serve as good promotional vehicles, while other interactive tools like wikis and discussion boards, that require a little more time and resources, are often better suited to hosting substantive dialogue and engagement. Online social media are rapidly changing and evolving, and merely showing up is not enough. It is important to consider how these online tools may be integrated in the central structure of these projects rather than simply as low-cost promotional tools.

Plan Ahead

A key problem the project organizers identified in the "Why Democracy?" project was the shortened timeline in which filmmakers felt rushed, broadcasters did not have time to promote the films in their markets, and the Democracy House members did not have content when they needed it for posting online. Setting specific expectations and communicating them clearly and effectively with all constituents is crucial for a project of this scale. An international project begins as a broadly defined and far-reaching concept, but ultimately must end as a local product, with format and content catered to the particulars of specific contexts. Local regional and cultural demands still require consideration of obstacles like language barriers, access to online or offline outreach, and timelines necessary for local media coverage. The "Why Democracy?" project achieved a lot with very limited resources. However, problems like limited language translations for the films and the website might have been mitigated by advanced planning and agreements with local partners.

APPENDIX I: The 10 Full-Length "Why Democracy?" Documentary Films

- **Title:** *Bloody Cartoons* (Denmark)
- **Director:** Karsten Kjaer
- **Question:** "Is God democratic?"
The filmmaker—a journalist, director and producer of more than 200 programs for European and Danish television—travels through Europe and the Middle East to examine the controversy created by 12 cartoon drawings of Muhammed published in a Danish provincial newspaper in September 2005, and asks where the limits of free speech exist in relation to respect for religious views.
- **Title:** *Campaign! The Kawasaki Candidate* (Japan)
- **Director:** Kazuhiro Soda
- **Question:** "Can politicians solve climate change?"
This film follows a self-employed 40-year-old man living in Kawasaki who is chosen by the powerful LDP political party to be its official candidate to run for a vacant seat on the city council and maintain the party's majority control of the council. The film explores whether a candidate with no political experience or backing can win an election, and reveals the inner workings of Japanese democracy.
- **Title:** *Dinner with the President* (Pakistan)
- **Directors:** Sabiha Sumar and Sachithanandam Sathananthan

Question: "Are dictators ever good?"

The filmmakers arrange a meeting with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf over dinner at his official residence, the Army House, to discuss the role of a military leader in creating a modern democracy. This conversation is compared to the ideas about democracy drawn from a diverse range of individuals from all sectors of Pakistan society.

Title: *Egypt: We are Watching You* (Egypt)**Directors:** Leila Menjou and Sherief Elkatsha**Question:** "Why bother to vote?"

The filmmakers follow three Egyptian women who begin a grassroots movement, "Shayfeen.com," to raise awareness among the public about the meaning of democracy. The film highlights the role of ordinary citizens in shaping their country's form of democracy.

Title: *For God, Tsar and Fatherland* (Russia)**Director:** Nino Kirtadze**Question:** "Who rules the world?"

Mikhail Morozov owns a town a short drive outside of Moscow called Durakovo—the "Village of Fools"—that draws people from all over Russia who move there to learn how to become "true" Russians. They give up their rights to obey the strict rules of Morozov, whose idol is President Putin, and who has semi-private meetings with the citizens to discuss the future of Russia and their own ambitions. The film reveals the driving forces behind Russian patriotism and why these people do not want democracy.

Title: *In Search of Gandhi* (India)**Director:** Lalit Vachaani**Question:** "Is democracy good for everyone?"

India's explosive growth in the past two decades has created a large middle class, but it still faces disparity between the rich classes and extensive poverty and illiteracy in the lower classes. The film explores whether democracy is benefiting everyone in India, or if it is just an elitist system for the educated classes.

Title: *Iron Ladies of Liberia* (Liberia)**Directors:** Siatta Scott Johnson and Daniel Junge**Question:** "Are women more democratic than men?"

The film asks whether women are naturally better suited to democracy than men by going behind-the-scenes of the first year of the administration of Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first elected female head of state in Africa. The central question addressed in the film is whether Sirleaf, and her mostly female cabinet, can bring peace and prosperity back to the war-torn country.

Title: *Looking for the Revolution* (Bolivia)**Director:** Rodrigo Vazquez**Question:** "What would make you start a revolution?"

Forty years after Che Guevara died in Southern Bolivia trying to spark revolution throughout South America, the country's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, is promising to continue the spirit of that revolution. This film inspects the current political structure and finds many of the old problems in the new system, which has created a tension between the administration and the landowners conspiring against it that threatens to crush the indigenous revolution.

Title: *Please Vote for Me* (China)**Director:** Weijun Chen**Question:** "Who would you vote for as president of the world?"

The director chose to conduct an experiment in democracy by convincing a third grade class in a central Chinese city to conduct a democratic election to select its class monitor. By following the political maneuverings of the eight-year-olds, and their parents, the film attempts to discover how democracy would be received in China were it to take root there.

Title: *Taxi to the Dark Side* (U.S.)**Director:** Alex Gibney

Question: Can terrorism destroy democracy?"

This film takes an in-depth look at the case of one prisoner, an Afghan taxi driver called Dilawar, who died in U.S. custody as part of the "war on terror." It sheds light on the processes and events that led to the introduction of torture as an interrogation technique in U.S. facilities.

APPENDIX II: Research Methods and Sources

Research for this report was conducted between September 2007 and April 2008. The author established and maintained contact with the Steps International team, particularly the Democracy House organizers and executive co-producer Don Edkins, between September and February. Weekly and bi-weekly phone and e-mail conversations during the peak period of the project from September through the end of October, independent observer tracking of the development of online elements of the project, and follow-up conversations from November 2007 through June 2008 helped the researcher track progress. The author was also able to use data shared by Steps International organizers, including monthly statistics for whydemocracy.net, budget and funding information, and broadcast ratings. Published film reviews, blog postings, interviews with the project principals, news articles, op-eds, websites linking to the project's site, and the internal Steps project evaluation provided the researcher with details of the project and its impact. Qualitative content analysis of forum and comment postings on the main project website at whydemocracy.net and its pages on social networking sites were also used by the researcher to determine the substance of the online conversation.

Social media and online outreach strategies have been compiled from e-mail and phone conversations with Kimberly Dasher from the Kaiser Family Foundation, Alan Rosenblatt from the Center for American Progress Action Fund, and Steven Peterson from the Bivings Group, as well as postings and conversations on blogs about social media strategies, most notably:

- [The Bivings Report](#) [8]
- [Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media](#) [9]
- [ImageSpace - Nonprofits and Web 2.0](#) [10]
- [NetSquared: Remixing the web for social change](#) [11]
- [The Social Organization: How Social Media is Changing Communication](#) [12]

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