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DOCUMENTARY



A scene from Katy Chevigny and Kirsten Johnson's "Deadline." Image courtesy of Arts Engine.

DOC COLUMN | Arts Engine Celebrates 10 Years

by Agnes Varnum (May 2, 2008)

Ten years can either be a blip or an eternity depending on your perspective. The year 1997 saw President **Bill Clinton** inaugurated for his second term, **James Cameron's "Titanic"** was the top movie and a book about a young wizard named Harry Potter first hit shelves. It was before the Internet stock bust and "information superhighway" was still a promise. The world of documentary in the U.S. was one of foundation funding, public television broadcast and educational distribution with precious few docs breaking into any kind of commercial success. It was in that entrenched world that then-new filmmakers **Katy Chevigny** and **Julia Pimsleur** felt like they had little opportunity.

But, filled with passion for telling stories that would address social issues and serve as catalysts for change, they founded **Big Mouth Productions** with their first production, "**Innocent Until Proven Guilty**," a portrait of the U.S. criminal justice system through the eyes of a young black public defender in Washington, DC. Big Mouth would give rise to the nonprofit media arts organization **Arts Engine** and its projects **MediaRights.org** and the **Media**

That Matters Film Festival. While it is still a young nonprofit at only 10 years old, Art Engine's foundation for success has been consistent, quality output and its groundbreaking use of the Internet in connecting audiences with films that were largely inaccessible not long ago. The organization is celebrating its anniversary with a retrospective screening series at **The Paley Center for Media** running from May 2 - 4.

Milton Tabbot, senior director of programming for **IFP**, was an early supporter of the Big Mouth team, which included Chevigny, Pimsleur and cinematographer **Kirsten Johnson**. They participated in the IFP Market with "Innocent Until Proven Guilty" as a work-in-progress, which went on to premiere at the **Berlin Film Festival**, and their next film, "**Nuyorican Dream**," premiered at the **Sundance Film Festival**. He notes, "In the late '90s, to an even greater extent than today, doc filmmakers were largely doing their own thing...with newcomers having to start from scratch to learn the ropes, search for resources, learn who their peers were and who had done what, and all the while not knowing exactly who would be interested in the work."

Chevigny, co-founder and executive director of Arts Engine, similarly recalls, "We didn't benefit from the old model. When we entered the field, we had to come up with new ideas. My former business partner [Pimsleur] had a vision around the internet." That vision included connecting concerned artists with activists involved in social justice issues, and using the web to expand access to documentary films. So with two successful productions under their belt and armed with ideas about connecting artists and activists via the web, they incorporated as a nonprofit organization and launched their first web project **MediaRights.org**, a searchable database of documentary films compiled from the offline catalog offerings of several independent distributors.

Director of American University's Center for Social Media and long-time media critic **Pat Aufderheide** notes, "Pre-Internet, it was a kind of mysterious art to know what documentary films were available. If you were at a university, your librarian was key, because they had the catalogs of the educational distributors." Pre-**Netflix** or **Amazon**, **MediaRights.org** was the place to find titles and descriptions on documentaries organized by topic. "It also did something critical: it created a bridge between filmmakers and nonprofit organizations, causes, campaigns and concerned citizens and community leaders," said Aufderheide. "MediaRights took advantage of the first Web tools for connection, and now it's reaching out with Web 2.0 tools as well." Today the database boasts over 7,000 titles and 17,000 members.

The Media That Matters Film Festival, launching its 8th incarnation on May 28, began as a proof of concept project. Before **YouTube**, easy video compression or broadband connections, the fest aimed to show short, issue-oriented films along with "Take Action" links to capitalize on the moment viewers connect to an issue and are motivated to do something about it. While developing **MediaRights** and the festival, Big Mouth continued production with "**Journey to the West: Chinese Medicine Today**" and "**Brother Born Again**," which premiered at **South by Southwest** in 2001.

Another benchmark moment for Arts Engine was in 2004 with their film, "**Deadline**." Premiering at Sundance, the film followed Illinois' Governor **George Ryan** as he struggled to reform capital punishment in his state, prompted by several revelations of innocence. Despite potentially serious consequences to his own political career, Ryan made judicial history by granting clemency to 167 death row inmates. The film made documentary history, as it was the first independent film to be picked up by **NBC's Dateline** for a national network television broadcast, airing to 6 million viewers in July 2004 and garnering an Emmy nomination.

In 2006, the Media That Matters festival had its first viral video hit, "**A Girl**



Arts Engine's Katy Chevigny.

"Like Me" by teenage filmmaker **Kiri Davis**, a moving piece about body image and self-esteem among African American girls. Chevigny notes that the success of the film resulted in crashing the Arts Engine servers. They had to temporarily rent equipment to keep up with the demand for the film, and they also started uploading it around the web on sites like YouTube to alleviate technology limitations. Millions have viewed the short and Davis was

featured on **Oprah** in May 2007.

In their spacious, bright Chelsea offices, documentary production happens side by side with producing the online shorts fest (also available on DVD for hosted screenings), growing online resources for independent filmmakers (like the Independent Producers' Outreach Toolkit) and taking on new projects such as the recent acquisition of DocuClub, the popular NYC works-in-progress screening series. Chevigny believes that keeping their production company housed with the other projects has been one key to their success, "Our resources stay fresh because we are always in the thick of the experience of making films." She cites her activism on copyright and fair use as an example, "The knowledge of the difficulty allows me to speak about it with some authority."

Arts Engine's list of accomplishments in ten short years is impressive, but yet to be fully realized is their contribution to the field via mentorship. Arts Engine has served as an incubator for the next generation of social justice filmmakers. "**How Wal-Mart Came To Haslett**" was produced by the fledgling Meerkat Media Arts Collective and was featured in the 6th Media That Matters Festival.

"Having our short film about Wal-Mart accepted into the Media That Matters Film Festival really helped to launch Meerkat Media," said collective member **Jay Sterrenberg**. "The festival began our ongoing relationship with Arts Engine. When they were putting together a channel of original media about the Immigrant Rights marches in 2006 and asked us to participate, we jumped right on board and made our short called '**Mayday**' in 24 hours that they were able to feature on their site." Arts Engine has continued to support the collective by featuring new work as it is released.

In addition to the upcoming retrospective and the launch of the newest Media That Matters festival, Big Mouth's most recent production, "**Election Day**" will screen on July 1 in the **PBS** summer documentary series **P.O.V.** The film follows 11 stories over the course of an election day to paint a portrait of the status quo of elections in the U.S. Other films included in the Paley Center series include "**Arctic Son**," which aired on P.O.V. last summer and "Outside Looking In: Transracial Adoption in America," as well as the other films mentioned above and selected shorts from the Media That Matters festival.

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