

FROM SMALL SCREEN TO SILVER SCREEN

Producing an Issue-Driven Documentary



New Orleans flooded after Katrina

may go in with a particular notion of what you might find, but that can and usually does change many times over the course of shooting, as the particulars of the story unravel. On that level, I felt immediately familiar with the process. But the technological choices in making a film are diverse, whereas television formats tend to be universal—most using some form of analog or digital beta tape.

Knowing from the outset on this particular film that there would be different DP's on the project (five to be exact) both here and abroad, affected format decisions that I previously had not dealt with. Should we go HD, use the new RED ONE™ camera,

As a producer, your reputation in the industry always precedes you.

or blow the budget to hell and go 35mm? Could we get the look of film at a lesser cost? And would the different cameras of the various DP's be an issue when it came time to edit? These were all considerations that I had not experienced in the arena of television production.

We ended up shooting *AMERICA BETRAYED* on HD cam at 24P, giving it the look and feel of film, without the considerable cost. But getting the various types and brands of HD cameras to sync up during editing and colour correction became one more hurdle to deal with on a feature production—a

As a long-time broadcast news journalist, reporting and producing in the television medium for network news organisations nationally and internationally, there is a certain comfort level commensurate with years of experience in this particular format.

By Leslie Cardé

SO, WHEN I WAS APPROACHED ABOUT producing a feature film documentary, it was essential to get a handle on the differences and similarities between the two mediums. I've always been a firm believer that good stories and interesting characters transcend the mode of delivery—be it a book, a television special or a feature film. Having said that, there are particular differences between producing a television documentary and producing a feature documentary made for the movie theatre.

Inherent in all documentaries is the fact that the shooting precedes the script. You

process, one then realises, that must become a part of all future feature budgets. Couple all of these issues with the fact that movies must be scored, previous news footage from media outlets all around the world must have releases, and a celebrity narrator on this movie meant Screen Actors Guild negotiations, and you have a horse of an entirely different colour from your basic television documentary.

This movie, in particular, had other issues as well. About one third of the movie was shot in a disaster zone—in what was left of New Orleans, post-Katrina. That entailed keeping the crews safe, at all costs, as shooting the “B” roll for the film often required walking around in enormous rubble, and lighting for areas which no longer had electricity. We all became very familiar with generators and masking the noise they produced. And, of course, getting past hurdles like using P2 cards with a computer in turbulent venues like airboats and helicopters—often the only way we could access the areas where we needed footage.

As with any political documentary where corruption, cronyism, and fraud abound, inside sources become key in telling the story. We're all familiar with the infamous television *silhouette*, in which the identities of the sources are often hidden to protect them from retaliation. It's a common practice, and as a long-time broadcast news journalist, I had used it effectively in pieces that ran around ten minutes in length. But producing a film that runs for over 90 minutes, I had decided that for these sources to be effective, I didn't want to see numerous people talking in the “shadows”, while sceptics questioned if these people were real or merely a figment of some creative director's overly active imagination. That meant convincing our sources that we would tell their stories accurately and without hyperbole.

I specifically remember conversations with one particular whistleblower, which went on for weeks before he green-lighted an interview I considered critical to expose the degree of corruption within the US government's Army Corps of Engineers. Without many of the people in this movie risking their careers and their safety by revealing inside information previously untold, the audacity of the crimes committed would have never been exposed. As a producer, your reputation in the industry always precedes you. Without it, there is no trust, and you, as a filmmaker, have no story to tell.

One of the biggest problems I found in shooting this feature documentary involved time. Some may consider it a luxury to have



Broken levee on the Sacramento River

18 months to finish a project—a luxury, by the way, I never had in television production. News directors were far too nervous about being *scooped* by another news organisation to ever let a project go for more than a couple of months from the inception of an idea to the finished project up on the small screen.

But with an extensive geographical travel schedule, contending with the erratic schedules of some of our best-known politicians in the US (who are in the film), and a WGA strike in the US last November

(from which television news producers are exempt, but not film producers), time was slipping away, and fears abounded that someone else would be on to the particulars of this story, and get it up on the big screen before this one would ever see the light of day.

Many stories had been told about the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, most notably a Spike Lee production for HBO, which concentrated on the inconceivably poor response by the US government to the victims of that tragedy. But I knew, to date, this was a story that hadn't been told: of why the levees failed in the first place, of the revolving door of cronyism that led to it, of the back-door deals that benefited large corporations but left the public hanging, of the notion of disaster capitalism that permeated the current US administration, in which no-bid contracts had become the rule rather than the exception.

This film eventually made it to the big screen in spite of all its hurdles, and before anyone else—including the mainstream news media—ever got wind of it or connected the dots. I knew we'd succeeded when I heard the audible gasps from folks in the theatre audiences upon learning what their government was *really* doing. I've often said I could write a book for television producers about navigating the landmines of making feature documentaries. I only wish there had been one to read before I ventured off into producing, writing and directing *AMERICA BETRAYED*. ■

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One of the thousands of New Orleans homes destroyed after Katrina