

## **Making Short Films For Workers – A Practitioner's View**

In an ideal universe, each worker in an enterprise to be privatized would be taken to an already privatized firm and be allowed to talk to other workers who had survived the process. And he or she would be taken to retraining facilities to see what options were available were there retrenchment. This would be all first-hand eliminating even the suspicion of propaganda. But there are too many workers and even the most public-spirited privatized firms are too busy to tolerate such an intrusive invasion. So we make video films instead.

Even a bad film is slightly better than nothing at all. A bad film is illustrated by the, still-too-common, film where the narrator does all the talking and we never hear from a worker. If we want to communicate with workers, it is far better that we make films which let workers do all the talking. Workers are innately credible, since they are obviously not actors and since they are speaking naturally, in their own words, which they would not do were they scripted by government. In other words they are obviously telling the truth. While there is still some editorial activity in selecting which interview to use, or which part of which interview, the style of the film is much more credible than a film where we only hear from a faceless narrator.

Shooting these films takes some skill. Anybody can wipe the sound-track off some footage of workers and hire a narrator to tell us how happy they are. And nobody will believe it. Instead, we want to hear the honest and coherent story from each worker we interview and ordinary people rarely talk so coherently. So we use a lot of videotape, and spend a lot of time cutting the audio track so that we remove the digressions and the worst of the ungrammaticisms. What is left is a real experience from a real person, that sounds a little neater and tighter than normal. Where the sound track is chopped up, we use it alongside moving pictures of people working (a voiceover), rather than alongside footage of the interviewee talking – because otherwise the sound of his voice will not match the smooth appearance of his mouth moving. If you do not understand this, your editor will, and you will know what he means when you start to watch the editing process.

Making a film of this complexity means that you will shoot a lot of video in order to edit together a fairly short documentary. Some of the best documentaries on labor issues in privatization made by the Adam Smith Institute have shot a ratio of ten or even eighteen minutes for every minute of edited footage. In terms of shooting alone, this is three or four times more labor intensive than a normal television news segment and is comparable to shooting a feature film. Except that video is cheap and 35mm cine-film is expensive. This sort of work will also take longer to edit than the usual, highly rigid documentary that most developing-world governments still produce. But it will be more honest and more effective.

An advantage here is that length is not important. The usual hassles of making your story fit into a 26-minute spot for a 30-minute television broadcast are missing when you are not interested in broadcasting. These are primarily shot for direct screening to worker audiences, and so they can be as long or as short as needs dictate. Remember that your worker audiences have a long attention span – they are not television viewers being bombarded with unwanted advertisements for fizzy drinks, they are people who may be deeply worried about job loss in a depressed national economy. If your information is clear and honest they will absorb as much as you care to share with them. However that should never justify sloppy editing or slack production. We've made effective educational documentaries for workers that have been no longer than ten minutes, and others for broadcast at nearly half an hour.

It is important to shoot these films in the vernacular language. Dubbing into another language ruins at least three quarters of the credibility because, really, the viewer has no proof of what the speaker is saying. You will need to use translators and roughly transcribe the interviews on each tape, then pay closer attention to what they are saying during the edit.

These sort of films are strongly focused on individuals and on their perceptions. This is intentional, because all advertising research suggests that we humans are interested in the stories of other people.

We also find them more credible than, say, statistics. So let people tell your story, and let the camera stay focused on each person long enough for some of their humanity to come through along with their information. During the interview process, ask the same questions in several different ways, in hopes that they will reveal a better answer or a flash of memorable humanity. For example:

- After privatization a former Indian tea-lady was promoted to assembly-line work formerly restricted to men. She explained this simply and easily. But only after four tries did we get her to tell us that the company pays for her night-school literacy classes and that her granddaughters are so proud that she is learning to read and write. Her proud smile was worth a day's work
- The Bangladeshi owner of a privatized bicycle-assembly plant gave us lots of statistics, but when we asked him his first thoughts he remembered that initially 55% of the workforce were clerks and none of them ever made a bicycle. That memory was very vivid to anyone accustomed to parastatal mismanagement
- A Nepalese worker in a privatized paper-mill, kept saying formalized things that he thought we wanted to hear. But finally he explained that he had initially come to work on foot and now, after many promotions, drove his own motorcar. Everyone in Nepal suddenly knew how far he had risen after privatization removed the bureaucratic impediments to promotion.

On the way to teasing out these memorable lines, you need to make lists of questions for each worker, and strategies to ensure that you talk to lots of different sorts of workers. For each worker, you want to know:

- How did their lives change, before, during and after reform;
- Is promotion easier or harder?
- How are working relationships different with your boss? With people under you?
- How have attitudes changed toward efficiency? Productivity? Profitability?
- Is the new management taking a different attitude to investment?
- Is there more or less corruption and why?
- What do the people think who stayed? And what about those who left?
- How are trade union-management relations now and why are they different?
- If there was a choice, would you want your son or daughter to work in a private firm or a public one?
- What is the biggest change in your family's lifestyle since reform? Is there anything you can do that you could not do before?

And so forth. Listen to their responses, or get running translations during the interviews (in between questions, or the whispers will be heard on camera) so that you can rephrase questions where need be. Similarly, make sure that all voices get heard. Interview the women. Do not forget clerical workers even if their work looks less interesting on camera (film them at home or on lunch break if you need a different visual background). Sweepers and tea ladies and temporary day-laborers often have interesting things to say, and so do managers. Usually privatized firms hire new managers with good interpersonal skills because they need to make a team focused on profitability.

A serious issue is what to do about reporting problems or difficulties. In some cases privatizations are not all equally positive. In some cases workers are unhappy. This is an ethical problem to be worked out between the communicator and his client, so there may be no universal answer. Generally we recommend that the editor ignore simple griping (there are whiners everywhere) but pay attention to substantive complaints and also to the management's answers, coherent or otherwise. In other words let the truth work its way out. In cases where the complaints are small, these can serve underline the freedom and realism of the documentary. And in some cases a small complaint looks small without the editor bothering to include any rejoinder. In one film made in a

privatized machine plant in West Bengal, one worker complains about minor changes in the canteen menu while another explains how management ensured that nobody was retrenched – the menu complaint looked fairly minor in comparison.

Finally is the matter of cost. There are many variables including:

- In which country are you filming? Work in South Asia is a lot less costly than work in most of Africa
- To what standard are you filming? Broadcast-quality Sony Beta equipment is more costly to hire than digicam, which is less than wedding-standard VHS
- Do you have a director? Is she/he competent to direct this sort of complex assignment or will you need outside help? Bringing in someone from outside is obviously a considerable expense, but a cheap local television crew will usually make everything look like it was produced for cheap local television
- Can you edit in a local studio and cut costs? You should be able to
- Are broadcast costs to be included? Promotional costs?

Source: Stephen J. Mastey (Adam Smith Institute), personal communication

---