

Surfing Multiple Tides: Opportunities and Challenges for Contemporary British and German Community Filmmakers.

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Introduction

Emerging out of the oppositional political and cultural movement in Europe from May 1968 onwards and often referred to interchangeably as either “avant-garde”, “independent”, “revolutionary”, “experimental” or simply “non-commercial” (Dickinson 1999, Harvey 1978, Rees 1999), community filmmaking has tended to be associated exclusively with a civic function. Such a function comprises using (documentary) film both as a form of social and political expression and as a platform through which structural systemic failings are exposed, interrogated and critiqued. From the outset, community filmmaking has been seen to position itself against perceived dominant mainstream politics and culture as well as hegemonic artistic and filmic traditions and associated organisational forms and practices by engaging in the making of (documentary) films and videos that serve specific communities and audiences. The ultimate goal has been to highlight “alternative representations” (Dickinson 1999) and to engage with pressing issues in community and public life that mainstream media either fail to or are unwilling to provide an outlet for. (Blanchard and Harvey 1983, Negt and Kluge 1993)

However, evolving socio-political and socio-economic circumstances have meant that nascent imperatives of a particularly professional, artistic and commercial nature now play an increasingly influential role in contemporary community filmmaking. The interplay between these divergent imperatives and the civic function can sometimes be at odds, posing huge problems for community filmmakers. Moreover, these filmmakers can be subjected to

systemic pressures such as demands from subsidy and politics, all of which have an impact on their work. Drawing on relevant literature and ethnographic field research, I address three key issues in this chapter. First, I discuss the ways in which community filmmakers respond to the interaction between professional, artistic and commercial imperatives alongside the core civic function. Where this interplay is ridden with tensions and contradictions, I highlight how community filmmakers negotiate these. Second, I present the response of community filmmakers to systemic pressures. Third, I evaluate how these filmmakers perceive their work following competing imperatives and systemic pressures.

Based on carefully selected case studies drawn from British and German contexts, my core argument is two-fold; a) the environment in which contemporary community filmmakers operate sometimes compels them to prioritise commercial, artistic and professional imperatives over the civic function and to give in to systemic pressures and, b) such practice provides crucial insights into the current dynamics impacting community filmmaking in a way that is only beginning to draw scholarly attention. The chapter is structured as follows. I specify how I deployed ethnography as a method of data collection, discuss the origins and development of community filmmaking in both Britain and Germany based on relevant scholarship and policy discourse, explain the different imperatives shaping the sector, then present community filmmakers' responses to the interaction between the different imperatives and to constraints from subsidy and politics followed by filmmakers' perceptions of their work before providing concluding remarks.

Methodology

This research set out to explore how contemporary community filmmaking in Britain and Germany has evolved since the countercultural era with a particular focus on principles, organisation, practice and practitioners' perceptions of their work. This required studying community filmmakers' experiences, interactions and communication all of which – to varying extents – linked to their biographical life histories as well as everyday personal and professional practices. A robust and detailed engagement with these aspects among many other things called for an ethnographic approach to fieldwork to help gather and unpick data that illuminated how the community filmmakers under study conceived of and constructed the world around them and what they saw as their role in it, something that was realised and yielded rich insight. The research questions at the heart of this ethnographic enquiry conducted between 2009 and 2012 read as follows:

1. In which ways do contemporary community filmmakers respond to the interaction between professional, artistic and commercial imperatives alongside their core civic function?
2. How do these filmmakers respond to challenges posed by systemic pressures?
3. How do these filmmakers perceive their work following competing imperatives and systemic pressures?

In response to these questions, I identified and studied four community filmmaking organisations which constituted *Amber Films* and *Stratham Productions* in Britain and *Fotolabor* and *Dahlberg Productions* in Germany respectively. Throughout this chapter, pseudonyms are used to refer to the last three named case study companies, their respective productions and other work in accordance with the ethical terms (anonymity and confidentiality) under which “preferential” access to pursue ethnographic fieldwork at those companies was given. In contrast, real names and titles are used for *Amber Films*, its

productions and other work because I solely studied publicly accessible documentary evidence (during the summer of 2015), “pseudonymising” of which would have presented ethical challenges. This derived from the fact that access at *Amber Films* did not materialise, unfortunately, as a result of timing issues but this was counterbalanced by the fact that it is the most widely studied case study in the sector in Britain owing to its pioneering status.

At *Stratham Productions*, *Fotolabor* and *Dahlberg Productions*, I spent four weeks at each during which I studied documents and artefacts, conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews and recorded everyday interactions and practices as a participant observer. All the companies under study in this chapter were selected based on longevity, a strong commitment to the civic function and the receipt of subsidy and/or broadcaster commissions. Britain and Germany were chosen for this piece of research because both countries share a common history of the oppositional political and cultural movement of the countercultural period, exhibit a relatively similar social democratic culture and are characterised by considerable structural inequities that lend themselves to being addressed by community filmmaking in ways that mainstream media, film and cinema may be unable or unwilling to.

Community filmmaking: history and theoretical overview

Under the workshop movement especially from late 1970s onwards, community film production utilised documentary film as a means of recording and communicating the real-life experiences of ordinary people and as such, served a clearly defined social purpose. (Nigg and Wade 1980) In order to try and achieve a significant impact, many community filmmakers in Britain and Germany strove to make films cheaply and independently which they toured in a bid to reach out to working-class and minority audiences in non-conventional venues across the country and to engage in discussions with such audiences after the showings. (Dickinson 1999, Medienzentren und Videogruppen in der BRD 1984)

To this end, community filmmakers made effective use of “alternative” production and distribution networks to break free from conventional circuits of cultural production and circulation (Higgins 1999) and from perceived constrictive public funding whenever possible (Hobson 2007). Generally, receipt of public subsidy was a bone of contention because of the fear of appropriation into the establishment. (Higgins 1999) In Britain, those community filmmakers who received public subsidy “saw no contradiction involved in making films about social reform within the context of state patronage.” (Dickinson 1999, 129) In Germany, community filmmakers were entitled to state funding if they made a case for the cultural enrichment of their work. (Hollander 1992, Negt and Kluge 1993) This was especially the case where such work drew on, engaged with and represented local culture, heritage and place among other things using film as a medium, something that speaks to one of the overarching themes in this edited collection.

In terms of organisation, community filmmakers favoured a horizontal way of working which was characterised by a commitment to equality and non-specialisation of tasks. Moreover, such filmmakers were keen to facilitate the involvement of ordinary people in all aspects of production. For example, ordinary people were allowed to look at and contribute to an unfinished film. (Blanchard and Harvey 1983, 231) Although this tended to prolong the production process, it granted ordinary people the opportunity to shape the meaning-making process significantly in line with the core civic function. Arguably, this can be viewed as the origin of the development of networks and/or communities of practice, another key theme of this edited collection.

Further still, although many community filmmakers were very passionate about their work, “few managed to make a living out of their film work [which explains why many] worked at other jobs to earn money...” (231) Nevertheless (and with a spirit reminiscent of pre-second world war documentarists before them), community filmmakers “remained

faithful to their [...] cause and presented a picture of a group of dedicated and idealistic filmmakers subjected to ‘hard work’ [...] long hours and low wages.” (Swann 1979, 26) In Britain, the 1980s witnessed a significant growth of the community filmmaking movement. (Catterall 1999; Hobson 2007) Gradually, this generated stiff competition among filmmakers in the sector for both subsidy and Channel Four broadcasting slots. While some commentators saw this development as a distraction from the initial causes of the oppositional film movement as a whole (Dickinson 1999), others noted the inadvertent need for the sector to “professionalise” and “enterprise.” (Newsinger 2009) This meant not only conforming to television conventions and making money in order to become self-sustaining in alignment with professional and commercial imperatives, but it was also largely a response to the Thatcherite “enterprise culture” that favoured entrepreneurialism over the reliance on subsidy. (Catterall 1999)

Community filmmaking in Germany between the 1970s and 1990s developed slightly differently owing primarily to political circumstances. Whereas the socialist government in the former German Democratic Republic favoured and invested heavily in local community and municipal print media which were perceived to be far easier to control than audio-visual media (Huettner and Nitz 2009), the then West Germany experimented with community communication initiatives already from the late 1970s onwards. (Hooffacker and Lokk 2009) The most prominent among these were open-access channels which enabled interested local communities to engage in the production of audio-visual programmes (as long as these were non-commercial and non-professional in nature) as part of the effort to enhance broader democratic communication. (Hollander 1992, Negt and Kluge 1993) Ole Prehn (1992) observed that these experiments went above and beyond merely providing a media platform for expression and representation to serving as “social laboratories for testing the degree of participatory potential in the respective communities.” (252) Community filmmaking in the

reunified Germany has significantly benefitted from this development ever since and has gone from strength to strength, albeit with some significant challenges along the way.

By contrast, when Channel Four and the other public institutions in Britain withdrew their funding from the sector by the early 1990s (Newsinger 2009, 158), many community filmmakers either left the sector out of frustration (Dickinson 1999) or moved to work for diverse production companies that made documentaries under traditional commissioning arrangements with diverse broadcasters. These developments may explain why many community filmmaking organisations did not survive beyond the 1990s. (Newsinger 2009) In the 2000s, the interaction between the ascendant artistic, professional and commercial imperatives in co-existence with the core civic function can place huge demands on community filmmakers in both countries. Before looking at community filmmakers' responses, it is helpful to explain the different imperatives in a little more detail.

Divergent imperatives in contemporary community filmmaking

As specified above, contemporary community filmmaking is steered by a number of imperatives that may not always be compatible. Its perceived core civic function, we saw, makes use of (documentary) film as a form of social and political expression in the interests of diverse communities and audiences. To borrow Corner's (2000, 2) words, this function promotes "publicity for citizenship", "journalistic inquiry and exposition" and "radical interrogation and alternative perspective."

Furthermore, the core civic function – to use Nichols' words - facilitates the making of work that aims "to explain aspects of the world to us [...] to analyse problems and propose solutions [to] invite us to understand aspects of the world more fully [to] observe, describe, or poetically evoke situations and interactions [and] to enrich our understanding of aspects of the historical world by means of their representations." (2001, 165) In marked contrast to

mainstream public-service and commercial media, community filmmakers strive to work with communities and publics to construct images and meanings which are evidently of relevance to people therein in an effort to present the “alternative” lived experiences outside of what may generally be viewed as the norm. (Nigg and Wade 1980)

Professional imperatives in cultural production orient community filmmakers to make good use of key attributes such as skill, competence, judgment and a devotion to a calling (McIntyre 2012) in putting together ideas and material in what Kilborn and Izod (1997, 4) call “documentary discourse.” Alongside skillsets in other areas of professional work like research, budgeting, project management, administration, marketing and distribution, an integral component of professional imperatives in filmmaking more generally is the adherence to ethical considerations that take into account the intention of documentary work and the obligation to all the stakeholders of such work. (Katz 2003, 334)

Community filmmaking can be said to be guided by artistic imperatives which have multiple dimensions owing to the understanding that “everyone will have their own response to [artistic] work [and will] make different judgements of [such work].” (Matarasso 2000, 53) In an interview response to what artistic qualities constitute, for example, a practitioner noted that “making [film] is all about creativity. It’s not just about technology. It’s about coming up with ideas, it’s about telling stories and doing it in a way that makes people [want to watch].” (Shaw 2001, 52) To DiMaggio (n.d., 41), artistic quality is about “craft skill, daring or disturbing content, innovative production technique [...]” Parker and Sefton-Green view artistic imperatives as facilitating “the ability to question, make connections, innovate, problem-solve, communicate, collaborate and [...] reflect critically.” (Oakley 2009, 4) Overall, artistic imperatives can be said to constitute novelty and the ability to put across key ideas in a manner that is accessible and addresses day-to-day issues and challenges. (Matarasso 2000, McIntyre 2012)

Commercial imperatives can potentially coerce community filmmakers into making market-driven production decisions that seek the greatest degree of profitability, something that invariably dictates the nature and content of documentary work. (Berra 2008) Critical theorists of cultural production take this further and argue that if there is no audience to which a particular cultural product can be sold profitably or if the audience does actually exist but may not possess the purchasing power to deliver swift profits and cover production costs, then that cultural product is highly unlikely to be made. (Miege 1989, Peterson 1982) For many community filmmaking companies intent on providing socially relevant cultural products that tend to be commercially unviable, aligning commercial imperatives with the civic function puts producers in a very difficult position.

Additionally, although public subsidy is intended to support the creation of work that embodies civic values but may not be financially viable, it often comes with strings attached. In certain cases, such strings may be at variance with the core civic function that is understood to make community filmmaking distinctive. This begs the question how community filmmakers are able to undertake their work in this net of constricting imperatives.

Case studies: Interplay of divergent imperatives and community filmmakers' responses

From the outset, the companies under study in this chapter demonstrated a strong commitment to civic values. For example, *Amber Films* - which was founded as a limited company in London but later moved to Newcastle Upon Tyne – documented changes in working-class life and work in the region. Established in 1976, *Stratham Productions* served predominantly three local communities in London. *Fotolabor*, initially formed as an umbrella organisation for diverse alternative publications in 1976/1977, is a Berlin-based community filmmaking entity specialising in photography and documentary. Similarly

located in Berlin is *Dalberg Productions* founded formally in 1981. The company makes documentaries and news directed primarily at German-Jewish audiences in Berlin and across Germany and Europe. Each of the case study companies is now presented in more detail.

Amber Films

We have seen that *Amber Films* portrayed alternative working-class representations in ways that these had not been hitherto widely known. (Newbury 2002) Comments by Murray Martin - a founding member appear to affirm this from the very beginning:

I mean, there was a discussion about what we should do [...] I was already engaged in documenting working-class life, and that's what interested me, and I think, ultimately that evolved into Amber's mission statement [...] What was important to me was that the individuals who you then attracted and who stayed felt passionate in the same way, and that very quickly became the basis of the evolution of the group, I think [...] So, in a way, I was always dragging everybody towards us documenting a working-class life, although as a creative collective. (Martin 2002)

An illustrative example of a documentary film that reflected a skilful negotiation of *Amber Films'* civic ambition with the different imperatives is entitled *High Row (1973)*. Recorded in a small drift mine near Alston in Cumbria, the film documents a working day in the life of a group of seven miners who had given up a variety of better-paid jobs in exchange for a more independent working life. (Dickinson 1999, 258) The civic value of *High Row* is three-fold: First, *Amber Films* "let the men direct the vision" of the film (254), something that gave the miners an opportunity to provide insights into their working conditions based on the authority of their experiential knowledge. Second, the documentary provided a visual representation of a form of employment or trade that is nearly defunct in contemporary

European society. Third, the production facilitated discussions relating to miners' working lives and broader working-class culture when toured to different audiences.¹

Professional imperatives were manifested in the amount of background research undertaken to understanding the mining trade from which “a much harsher script” had been written and to which the miners had responded saying that “[i]f you think that you wouldn't work down the mine.” (254) What is more, *Amber Films* made use of a range of documentary filmmaking conventions to “weld various components (words, images and sound effects) into an artefact that can have both functional and aesthetic appeal.” (Kilborn and Izod 1997, 12) From an ethical perspective, *Amber Films* built a working and community relationship with the miners, remarkably remunerated the miners for their involvement and collaborated with academics who supported the documentary with expertise.

From an artistic vantage point, *High Row* made an effort to “communicate something of the men's own vision of their lives in a rich texture of sounds and images [whereby the omission of commentary and dramatic climax enabled reliving] the pace and rhythm of their working day, while creating a cinematic prose poem from the surreal, yet harmonious co-existence of grinding archaic machinery and unperturbed wildlife.”² Financially, the documentary attracted large audiences implying that it was commercially successful. *High Row* benefitted from subsidy too in its production. There is no evidence to suggest that such public support posed any problems or constraints. Virtually all *Amber Films*' productions to date I reviewed appear to have followed more or less a similar pattern. We now turn to the second British case study namely *Stratham Productions*.

Stratham Productions

¹ See further details on *Amber Film*'s website - <http://www.amber-online.com/archives/high-row>

² Amber Online. “High Row.” Accessed July 28, 2015, <http://www.amber-online.com/archives/high-row>

Ethnographic research at *Stratham Productions* showed that from its inception, the company has worked primarily with community groups across London. In the production of documentaries and news content, the four core filmmakers at the company attach great importance to building a “mutually beneficial” relationship with community groups as one of the core staff called Debbie comments:

We respond to individuals - not solely issues - and take the time to develop a relationship that is mutually beneficial with participants [...] There is a focus on access and participation across [our] work, which covers themes of urbanism, regeneration, gentrification, displacement etc. and social conscience [...] *Stratham Productions* is often commissioned to work in partnership with a number of community-led projects as a media partner. Although this does not always end in a film, it's still worthwhile because offshoots emerge from which many films have been made. (Debbie)

During my fieldwork at the company I assisted on one of the “offshoots” called *Nature Before Olympics* which comprised a series of short documentaries. Following up on how the idea for this documentary emerged to ascertain whether socio-political goals were identifiable, I learnt that the selection of the subject matter treated in this serial documentary stemmed from ideas and actual experiences gained while *Stratham Productions* worked on a commissioned five-year partnership programme with community-led projects around London.

Work on *Nature Before Olympics* began in 2005 after it transpired that several natural spaces were to make way for the construction of some of the facilities for the London 2012 Olympics games. The short film series documented the resistance of a number of communities to these plans both before and during the construction phase, helping them to express their emotional situation. (Grigsby 1995, 8–9 cf. Kilborn and Izod 1997, 7) Although some participants took a leading role in the making of this documentary in line with civic values, professional imperatives emphasised the need for direction and power to be in the hands of a film director or production crew to effectively realise the film project. (Rosenthal

2007) Chapman (2007), for example, contends that relinquishing too much authorship and power on the part of the director or production crew “amounts to a gamble with creative vision.” (15) In my role as a participant observer at *Stratham Productions*, I became aware that the company’s core filmmaking team were very much aware of this conundrum.

Indeed, in an effort to maintain the “creative vision” of *Nature Before Olympics* and to observe the conventions of “documentary discourse”, the core team assumed a more creative and directorial role at times and at others, they let community groups lead the creative vision. On the occasions when *Stratham Productions*’ filmmakers dictated the vision, I witnessed many instances where “events [were] specially orchestrated to make them more amenable to capture by the camera [while] [i]n other cases subjects [were] directed in such a way that their ‘contributions’ fit[ted] in with the film-makers’ preconceived notions of what [was] required.” (Kilborn and Izod 1997, 199) Whatever its limitations, this participatory approach points to a mostly skilful negotiation between socio-political and professional imperatives. We now look at *Fotolabor* – the first of the two German case studies.

Fotolabor

Fotolabor similarly works in partnership to help local communities in Berlin in – as Hans, one of *Fotolabor*’s two founding members put it – “finding and expressing their voice in their own way and on things that mean something to them”, an expression that can take the form of “an exhibition or a slide show on the Internet or as a book or poster or film...” A review of documentary evidence at *Fotolabor* - in conjunction with data from interview accounts - demonstrates that a recurring theme in the company’s work over the decades concerns urbanisation and related issues.

A documentary that exemplifies this is *The Victims of Urbanisation (2004)* which tells a story of how local government initiatives aimed at redeveloping the inner city since the early 1980s have fostered a two-fold pattern. On the one hand, increasing urbanisation has reshaped Berlin into one of the most prominent metropolitan cities in Europe which is beneficial in a number of ways. For example, many old housing estates have been either refurbished or demolished giving way to new corporate blocks that have attracted businesses and investments. In turn, these have contributed to the city's economic growth in terms of employment and tax income.

On the other hand, however, this development has fostered a shortage of reasonably affordable residential units, rendering the rent prices in these blocks extremely high. Particularly working-class tenants, the unemployed and immigrants with a habitually low disposable income cannot afford such exorbitant prices and as such, have been hit hardest. The documentary observed that many have not only lost their homes, but that they are being pushed out of the inner-city and out of sight of the general public and foreign tourists. Indeed, a look at the photographic record assembled by Sven – the second co-founding member of the company - over the decades shows many disadvantaged individuals retreating to the “numerous backyards of the city” which are themselves “being clamped down on”. Not only have such individuals “been thrown out of these places”, according to Sven, but “a huge portion of the city's history has also been destroyed.” Having recorded these developments for years through social photography and documentary film, Sven is very critical of the unresponsiveness of politics and mainstream media to these injustices. Of this grim scenario, Sven remarks:

We keep making the general public aware of the fact that [this] leaves many people on the fringes of society who no longer quite fit into the mould [of the city] due to social and political problems and are [therefore] displaced. They are driven out of areas... areas where a given image of the city has to be

cultivated and in this image, a certain and increasingly large group of people does not fit in. That is the dark side of this city. (Sven)

From a civic perspective, *The Victims of Urbanisation* engages “with aspects of the real world that [have] some drama and perhaps importance – that we might do something about a particular situation or at least should be aware of it.” (Chapman 2007, 2) In doing so, it demonstrates “special relevance to the socio-political world [in the sense that it] help[s] us to gain a better sense of the place which we as individual citizens might occupy within the larger order [and reminds us] that what we are witnessing can, potentially at least, spill over into the world which we or others like us inhabit.” (Kilborn and Izod 1997, 231)

My ethnographic fieldwork revealed that professionalism in the production of *The Victims of Urbanisation* was reflected in the prolonged years of observation, research, holding conversations with victims, conducting interviews with local authorities and studying archival records on the subject. As such, aspects of real-life experiences were merged with other material gathered through imagery from social photography and skilfully crafted into the documentary. From an artistic perspective, filmmakers at *Fotolabor* utilised the documentary to explain the process of increasing urbanisation through making connections with its associated problems in an imaginative and compelling way. Although the documentary was unable to secure public subsidy because it was “too disturbing for [the local authorities]”, it was well-received at screenings where it made good sales and was even purchased by a broadcaster. I now discuss *Dahlberg Productions*.

Dahlberg Productions

Founded by Bianca and a colleague in 1981, *Dahlberg Productions* has since then predominantly engaged with themes concerning the German-Jewish community in Berlin, across Germany and in Europe as reflected below:

In essence, our work is all about Jewish life. It's not primarily about the past but we do obviously allude to the historical circumstances and how we think they relate to certain aspects of life today. If you watch public service television, you will notice that [Jewish life] is reported in terms of the Holocaust [...] or in terms of the rich or the Middle East crisis. Such reporting is usually laden with stereotypes that are always reproduced. We try to counter [these] and lots of other misperceptions [...] with testimonies of contemporary witnesses [...]. If at the end of it all, people can relate with and think about what they've seen and heard, I can't think of a better way that reflects what the real situation is, [portraying] ordinary [Jewish] people who like everyone else have problems and may be rich or poor.

(Bianca)

The company thrived on commissions from diverse broadcasters until the mid-1990s to make documentary films covering Jewish community and public life in former East Germany that Bianca noted “was not well known in the West.” A documentary that typifies the company's work is titled *Vivid Memories* (1987). It tells a story of a high-ranking Secret Service officer in the Nazi regime military who is tried in court for war crimes against humanity decades after the Holocaust ended.

The documentary makes use of the verbatim aesthetic by drawing on extensive research and on edited scripts from the court trial to engage with subject matter, and in doing so, comes across as powerfully persuasive, authentic and informative, mainly because it provides a unique forum for protagonists to speak themselves. *Vivid Memories* was financially successful and is used as an educational resource as are a number of the company's documentaries that I studied. Strikingly, a number of the documentaries I reviewed including the most recent ones appeared to follow a similar formula.

However, the scaling back of commissions following structural developments in the German broadcasting landscape since the early 1990s has gradually compelled *Dahlberg Productions* to turn to alternative sources of income to sustain its work. My ethnographic research indicated that the company has coped ever since through two main ways; producing

commissioned industrial films and maintaining a regular broadcast news bulletin via Berlin's iconic open-access channel which tends not to interfere with filmmakers' work provided such work fulfils the basic technical and ethical (and sometimes artistic) standards of the station. The former has involved mostly making non-corporate films that have featured in anniversary events, commemorative rituals, exhibitions, presentations, public-service announcements and artistic installations. Examples hereof include exhibition films for memorial centres and sites and associated educational programmes and information events that aim to preserve a verbal and visual record of the causes, process and consequences of the Holocaust.

A closer engagement with the audio-visual news bulletin showed that it engages with the contemporary lived experiences of Jewish people across Europe. Often, contributions utilise the past to provide context and relevance in illuminating such experiences. Additionally, the news bulletin plays a kind of "community-building" role that requires the facilitation of and engagement with consensus building around Jewish collective memory and its construction, interpretation and representation. The prolonged, in-depth engagement with multiple views on key issues around concepts, historical narratives, authorial voice and terms of reference among many other things has meant that *Dahlberg Productions* has established itself as an authority on Jewish issues. Whereas this may be viewed as the company's greatest strength, Bianca indicated that oscillating between the community-building role and working to professional news-making values that may require adhering to objectivity and its associated norms of balance and impartiality can be very challenging.

The question of autonomy and perceptions of work

Like all cultural production, community filmmaking is not always insulated from the art-commerce/subsidy dialectic which positions the relationship between creativity and commerce as one that is highly "polarised" and ridden with "conflict and struggle." (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 70) This means that the capacity of filmmakers to shape their work

and exercise freedom from particular demands can be severely constrained by various factors, thereby generating difficulties. Community filmmakers under study in this chapter have tended to respond in three different but interrelated ways; diversifying their income base; compromising between their autonomy and receipt of subsidy; embracing low cost production strategies; and branching out into other content dissemination formats. For example, *Amber Films* strategically widened their income base right from the outset by investing and reinvesting in property to safeguard their autonomy. (Dickinson 1999, 251)

Filmmakers at *Fotolabor* strive to achieve a balance between retaining their independence and receipt of subsidy as the following example demonstrates. In 2006, producers made *What Now For Johanna?*, a documentary which tells a story of Johanna, a 67 year-old unemployed, disabled woman. The documentary responded to a series of government reforms which became known as *Agenda 2010* that had been introduced by the Social Democratic/Green coalition government in 2003. *Agenda 2010* aimed to boost the weak economy by reducing health-care and welfare benefits, restructuring labour regulations and reforming the pension system. *What Now For Johanna?* set out to highlight the adverse effects these reforms would have on disadvantaged groups across the country, particularly the unemployed, the ill, the disabled and the poor. According to Hans, although it was widely believed that *Agenda 2010* would spark economic growth and reduce unemployment, this would happen at the expense of the disadvantaged who would be hit hardest.

However, authorities declined to fund *What Now For Johanna?* noting that it was “too polemic and biased”. It was only after producers addressed these concerns “by rework[ing] a few scenes” that they received funding, pointing to a compromise between their autonomy and demands from subsidy. Filmmakers at *Stratham Productions* have averted this kind of compromising by incorporating workshops into their core work, adopting “low budget tactics for producing stuff [such as] getting the best out of last year’s technology

rather than keeping buying new stuff”, “recycling stuff” and acquiring subsidies from Europe without strings attached. All these serve as strategies to diversify the company’s funding base. *Stratham Productions* also makes effective use of social media and film screening festivals to disseminate its work, a strategy that is instrumental in helping the company to circumvent commercial pressures exerted by mainstream broadcasters and cinemas.

Owing to declining broadcast commissions, *Dahlberg Productions* gradually broadened its repertoire by creating a regular broadcast news bulletin and undertaking non-commercial industrial productions as we have seen. The sponsored films that earn *Dahlberg Productions* a significant additional income tend to publicise services offered by a range of Jewish community organisations, particularly in the areas of family and social care, health as well as entertainment and leisure. A number of sponsored films I studied recorded rare footage of Jewish heritage in former Eastern Germany and as such, were featured in exhibitions in memory institutions as well as used as learning resources in education.

A collation of insights drawn from interviews, reviews of documentary evidence and my field notes taken as a participant observer indicated that the community filmmakers under study perceived their work following conflicting imperatives and constraints from public support along four main lines: professionalism, autonomy, impact and passionate attachment to work. In terms of professionalism, Murray Martin of *Amber Films* spoke about how “they’ve always argued for professionalism [meaning] you’re only a film-maker if you live off film-making...” (Dickinson 1999, 250) He underlined the need to professionalise without compromising *Amber Films’* ideals by selling their skills as crew to television in order to develop their craft but wouldn’t make their films. (Newsinger 2009, 132)

Charles at *Stratham Productions* identified accreditation problems that the company faced when he noted that “there’s been numerous situations where we’ve gone on a shoot and we’ve been told: ‘Oh no, you can’t come in or you can’t film this or that because you’re not

officially accredited...’ Well it’s not about some kind of special recognition of a profession. It’s about information and control.” All the filmmakers under study emphasised the versatility of community filmmaking which they noted as constituting a range of professional tasks spanning research, making grant applications, doing accounts and project-managing among many others.

Community filmmakers also stressed the significance of freedom in being able to determine the terms of their creative engagement noting the desire “to work independently”, to be able “to work outside of [mainstream] television” and “outside of the mainstream film industry.” Autonomy meant being able “to try out things”, to “fail without being blamed for it” and “not to allow funding to dictate the nature and content of work.” Closely linked to this is the aspect of impact which manifested itself predominantly through being able to “influence public discussions”, “discovering stories that need to be told” and “helping to give a voice to those that are not heard or outright ignored.” In turn, this often fostered passionate attachment to work that was invariably displayed in the gratification derived from the enjoyment and enrichment of working with communities despite the sometimes very challenging working conditions.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored three interrelated aspects, namely a) how British and German community filmmakers respond to the interplay between professional, artistic and commercial imperatives alongside their core civic function, b) how such community filmmakers respond to systemic pressures, and c) how they perceive their work following conflicting imperatives and systemic pressures. The case study companies make the most of their long-term involvement in and knowledge of the communities they serve to facilitate the

expression and representation of multiple lived experiences through documenting the impact of pressing issues affecting community and public life, something that chimes in with recent research in England. (Malik, Chapain and Comunian 2014) With the exception of *Amber Films*, the rest are struggling and have had to adopt pragmatism to endure. What Willemsen (1989, 10) once argued for Third Cinema, I argue for contemporary community filmmaking: for it to be seen as a flexible sphere characterised by research and experimentation, one that adapts to shifting dynamics at work in social struggles and one that speaks to a socially pertinent discourse which both the mainstream and the authorial cinemas exclude from their regimes of signification.

Socially pertinent discourse here is reflected in the use of (documentary) film as a medium for expression and representation of issues of concern, interest and relevance to local communities in a way that is meaningful to them. Key to this is the role of community filmmakers as “media partners” in community projects as we have seen and as other research elsewhere has shown. (Cumming and Norwood 2012) Shifting dynamics at work embody the need for professionalization and enterprise not only to highlight the importance of being seen to be professional as the accreditation problems at *Stratham Productions* and news-making values at *Dahlberg Productions* indicate, but also the need to develop strategies to attract income in order to survive and sustain work. It is here that research and experimentation has been instrumental in helping to move beyond (documentary) film to devise other modes of representation and communication that have taken the form of news and informational content provision as is the case with *Stratham Productions* and *Dahlberg Productions* and of (social) photography and exhibitions as demonstrated by *Amber Films* and *Fotolabor*. These developments can be said to speak to issues of content and process innovation, something that has presented both opportunities and challenges in which the civic function remains discernible, albeit to varying degrees.

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