

Videos That Aim to Change the World

By Sandy McCune Westin

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." [Margaret Mead](#)

When Margaret Mead shared this powerful thought with the world in the mid-Twentieth Century, it inspired untold numbers of idealists to step out of their comfort zone and take on the challenge to "make a difference". Who knows how many ways our world has been changed as a result? The Civil Rights Movement, the end to the Vietnam War, and Women's Liberation are just a few of the changes that have come about in the six brief decades since as a direct result of populace pressure. A century further back, Victor Hugo's famous statement, "*All the forces in the world are not so powerful as an idea whose time has come*", has certainly proven to be true.

Neither Mead nor Hugo, however, could have foreseen the incredible power of the individual to influence the masses that is evident in this new century, thanks to the ubiquitous forces of technology. Rather than taking months, if not years, to move ideas and stories into readers' minds, today an idea can be born, formed, and distributed as an electronic book in a matter of days, or in the case of blogging, minutes. For good or ill, it would appear that publishing has gone from the privilege of the few and the skilled to its current democratic zenith where anything can be published with an immediacy which has been able to change history in the blink of an eye.

The power of the written word has in some ways been eclipsed by the even greater immediacy of audio-visual presentations. There's something compelling about seeing people show and tell their stories in the first person, an art form well known to pioneering journalist Edward R. Murrow. As with electronic books, the creation, production and distribution of videos is now within reach of a vast number of ordinary people, and no longer the exclusive province of Hollywood.

In recent months, several videos have emerged in popular awareness that have each in its own way influenced public opinion, and potentially lead to social action that can result in real

change. Not all are amateurish productions. Some have been recognized by the industry with multiple national and even international awards, while others, produced by individuals and distributed only on the Internet, have gone viral literally within hours, carried into fame or notoriety through the power of social media. All are proving impactful both to individual viewers, and through private home and community screenings. When coupled with facilitated dialogues, they are influencing thousands. Dr. Mead and Mr. Hugo? Meet the agents of change who have followed in your prescient footsteps.

- [20,000 Dialogues](#) this Washington, DC-based organization serves as promoter and distributor of seven highly polished videos produced by the Unity Productions Foundation which center around the theme of building Western understanding of the world of Islam, its people and their faith. In a recent conversation with Daniel Tutt, Executive Director of 20kD, he said, “Our goal is not really to have 20,000 dialogues, although we’re getting close to that number. Since 2007, we’ve registered more than 18,000 showings and dialogues of our films. Our goal is really to change hearts and minds of Westerners about Muslims; to shift the conversation from about fear to one of greater understanding.” With active outreach into high school classes across the US, coupled with social media, YouTube and public television, 20,000 Dialogues is continuing to find ways to bring Americans into that new conversation through the coupling video showings with guided dialogue. Unity Productions has plans for more films in the future as funding allows.
- **Canadian Frogs:** On the other edge of North America, British Columbian Jonathan Cooksey set out to chronicle his own journey from relative ignorance of the current state of our environment to his current one-man campaign to raise everyone’s awareness of this emerging, critical issue. His characteristic wry humor has made his production, [“How to Boil a Frog”](#), entertaining and yet disturbing in its stark representation of the role transnational corporations are playing in the very high stakes game of manipulating our planet’s resources for their unilateral gain. Cooksey is beginning to see his film accepted by US education and international distribution channels, fueled at least in part by public demand generated by word-of-mouth response to this off-beat film. Cooksey recently commented, “Videos are power-wired storytelling. They enable diverse points of view to come together and view information that can spark

new ways of looking at under-considered issues and spawn new discussions. This film is being adapted in Poland by a couple of women who want to use it as a basis for a TV show that will focus on their own local environmental issues. Who could have predicted that?" He has no formal evaluation process nor discussion guides in place to accompany "Frog", but anecdotal evidence is shared with him spontaneously indicates his film is shifting the opinions people have about the role we humans collectively are having on the Earth, and what can be done about it. "Change happens person to person", commented Cooksey. "I encourage people to buy the movie, then pass it along to friends once they've seen it. Keep it in circulation, and hopefully the ideas it carries will spread."

- **Globalized Soul:** Film makers Kell Kearns and Cynthia Lukas have brought out five thought-provoking videos through their company, [Heaven And Earth Productions](#). This latest video loosely weaves together a bouquet of glimpses into the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, interfaith counter-violence work in Jerusalem, aid to the physically handicapped in India, quotes from a few formative thinkers in the interfaith movement, and glimpses into Jainism, Sufism, and other lesser known faith traditions. The overall message is one of interfaith work reflecting and contributing to a sense of connectedness throughout the world among peoples of all walks of life. The film leaves one with a warm sense of hope that there truly is a drumbeat of good news building behind the more accessible headlines of doom and gloom. Their current project is a biography of Gandhi.

- **Kony 2012:** In marked contrast to the benevolence and education stimulated by many such videos, the recently released "Kony 2012" has violence as both its theme and advocacy. While its producers could not be reached for comment, there is plenty being said about this polished story of Joseph Kony, the mastermind behind so many atrocities committed in Uganda in the 1990's. The film builds a strong demand for a global effort by governments and the general populace to ferret out this strongman from his hiding place and requires that he be brought to justice for his crimes against humanity. My own recent contacts with interfaith leaders in Uganda itself, however, point out that Kony himself has been consistently waning in power and influence in Africa. He now reportedly has followers numbering fewer than 300. This film is considered by many to have actually done more damage than good. By drawing attention to Kony's crimes of

decades past, they note, the very process of healing which Uganda is working hard to foster is being undermined by generating renewed anger and backlash. The power of video to move to action is not always in the name of peace.

- [We Love You – Iran & Israel](#): And then there's the Everyman who, with no budget and little personal reach, used a homemade video which just possibly may avert a war. Rafi, a 41 year old father, graphic designer and citizen of Israel, took it upon himself to make a personal statement to the people of Iran through Facebook. His message was a simple one, declaring that the war-mongering by the Israeli government does not represent the views of all the people of Israel. Within 24 hours, hundreds of Israeli's made their own statements in harmony with Rafi's. Within 48 hours, the people of Iran began mirroring back the same message to Israel: "We do not hate you; we love you."

These are only a sampling of the many popular videos out there today that merit the awareness of thoughtful people everywhere. This is a new kind of viral infection – one whose spread can be an incredibly powerful force for peace. But how can we measure the impact that such videos are having? Of those interviewed for this article, 20,000 Dialogues was the only video producer who incorporates an evaluation process into their films' showings. According to Daniel Tutt, "An event (showing) can follow any of several different models: A video can be viewed by an independent citizen, it can be part of a community event at a church or theatre, or it can be a private showing for a group gathered in someone's living room. The films are provided free of charge, although of course we gratefully accept donations to support this work. We do require an evaluation of the showing using our post-event questionnaire. A video can be shown in whole or in clips as a series of events. We encourage that those producing group showings invite a diverse audience – people of different faiths, including no faith at all. To assure some consistency of presentation, we also require the use of our discussion guides and toolkits for all group showings."

Words and thoughts are now accessible to more people around the world than Herr Gutenberg could have ever imagined when he first put paper to press. Other media have left behind their former elite limitations. Thanks to Internet platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, anyone, anywhere who has the relatively rudimentary skills and tools available can be a director,

filmmaker and broadcaster or distributor rolled into one. Some of the resulting populist productions are entertaining and some find others to be upsetting, but the potential of the video medium to change our world is just beginning to be tapped.

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