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‘POV’ at 25: A quarter century of fearless films



4 days ago by [Kevin Ritchie](#)



‘POV,’ the longest-running showcase for independent documentary on television, kicks off its 25th season this Thursday (June 21) on PBS. Here, directors, producers and program execs discuss the strand’s past, present and future.

Whenever Laura Poitras works on a film, a key step in the process is soliciting creative feedback from the producers at ‘POV,’ the PBS documentary strand that is entering its 25th season this June.

In the past decade ‘POV’ has aired three of her films, including 2007 Iraq war doc *My Country, My Country* and *The Oath*, in which she profiled Salim Hamdan, the driver for al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden during the 1990s.

The films, steeped in Poitras’ interest in human rights and geopolitics, have attracted much attention, not all of it welcome by the filmmaker. She has since been stopped and interrogated by U.S. border police, by her count, more than 40 times – a situation that prompted doc organization Cinema Eye to rally for support from other documentarians such as James Marsh, Davis Guggenheim, Michael Moore and Louie Psihoyos.

When she showed Simon Kilmurry, ‘POV’ executive director since 2006, a rough cut of *The Oath*, she warned him that the series could face significant backlash if he programmed it. “I said, ‘OK, this is a film that’s going to deal with interrogation, torture, al-Qaeda, Yemen, and Guantanamo Bay and there might be some push back,’” she says. ““He said, ‘When you’re ready, we’d love to partner with you on it.’”

The ability to provoke is a long-standing documentary tradition. ‘POV,’ the longest-running showcase for independent docs on TV, was born out of a tense relationship between the indie doc community and historically controversy-averse public broadcasting, which is why creating a context around a film is as big a part of the strand’s mission as the broadcast.

In addition to doling out between US\$800,000 and \$900,000 in annual copro and acquisition fees, 'POV' spends an additional \$2 million on outreach, education and digital marketing, produces guides and lesson plans and works with community groups to organize 600 screenings annually in libraries, museums and church basements across the U.S.

"Like a really good meal, you have to taste all the ingredients," says Kilmurry. "There's attention not only to the ingredients, but to the presentation. There's a number of ways that you can enjoy the films and how they're produced."

The cable market has expanded significantly in the quarter century since the strand's first broadcast. However, despite all the new channels and platforms, homes for independent documentaries are few. Aside from 'POV,' American doc fans can rely on PBS' 'Independent Lens' and HBO for a regular fix, and more recently, the OWN Documentary Club, with word of a similar strand on the way for Bravo.

"There's a lot more competition in general for eyeballs but there's actually not a lot more competition in terms of this type of work," says Kilmurry. "So the role of public television and 'POV' is as important as ever despite what might look like a much bigger media environment."

Thus, 'POV' remains a pre-eminent source for personal and experimental work, but in ensuring that it remains a permanent home for indie docs, producers and network execs have endured a few flare-ups along the way.

In May, the National Endowment of the Arts announced that it would slash \$150,000 in funding to the strand this year, while a PBS brass decision to shift it from its Tuesday night time slot to Thursday nights resulted in local stations in major markets such as New York and Los Angeles shifting it around the dial.

The indie doc community staged an online protest, and the network has announced it will move the strand to a Monday night time slot.

"I'd go to the ramparts any time public television is attacked to defend it because we feel it's very important," says Gordon Quinn, co-founder of Chicago-based non-profit Kartemquin Films, which organized a petition and formed an informal steering committee of producers in response to the time slot change.

"It is the kind of institution with this public accountability we think is important," he maintains. "There's a vast media landscape in America; this one little sliver of public media helps to keep the rest of them honest. It has a tremendous influence beyond its viewership."

Prior to the first 'POV' broadcast in 1988, documentaries were adrift on TV. ABC, NBC and CBS did not reliably program them and public broadcasting would reject docs with a personal slant as not adhering to journalistic standards. If a documentary with an incendiary point of view made it on air, the fallout could be damaging.

In 1985, PBS aired *When the Mountains Tremble*, Pamela Yates and Thomas Sigel's film about Nobel Prize-winning Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú's struggle against Guatemala's repressive regime. The film questioned American commercial interests in the South American nation.

The founder of 'POV', producer Marc Weiss, recalls that Reagan-era conservatives were vocal in their distaste for the film, calling for cuts to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's (CPB) federal funding.

"That came to be called 'When the Stations Trembled,'" he says. When Weiss pitched the idea of a doc strand to PBS, the idea was to "make it into something that had been seen as a problem and turn it into a strength."

"Most independent documentaries did not come from a tradition of journalism," he says. "It was a tradition of what I called the 'poets and the pamphleteers of our time' – people who were reflecting either their own perspectives or the perspective of a community."

“‘POV’ represented an organizing principle to the great variety of what you could call independent film,” adds John Wilson, senior VP and chief TV programming executive for PBS. “Giving it a series and a vessel into which to pour this wonderful variety of films made sense to the station, and ultimately to the viewer.”

To attract media attention and thus ensure films would be viewed in the appropriate light, PBS strategically scheduled the series during the summer months when other networks aired reruns and TV writers were in need of fresh fodder.

Early highlights included *Dark Circle* (1989) – a doc on nuclear power that Weiss says had been previously rejected by PBS programmers as too incendiary – *American Tongues* (1988), *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993) and *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994).

In recent years, the strand has shown Robert Kenner’s *Food Inc.* (2010) and Janus Metz’s Afghan war doc *Armadillo*, and on Thursday (June 21) will kick off its 25th season with Jennifer Fox’s 20-years-in-the-making *My Reincarnation* (2012).

To date, director Marlon Riggs’ 1991 doc *Tongues Untied* remains the strand’s most controversial doc. The film tackled the issues of homophobia within the black community, racism within the gay community, and the implications of both for black gay men. Some stations aired it during primetime, some refused, and others shifted it to the early morning hours.

“Whatever the decision, [the stations] were attacked by people within their communities on either side. It was a pretty intense period,” says Weiss. “I could say with absolute assurance that you couldn’t show *Tongues Untied* today.”

Director Marco Williams calls that film a “seminal” moment for ‘POV’ and PBS. “[Most cable] broadcasters are very, very, very formulaic. You have to make their kind of film to be on and I’ve made films for those cable outlets. So for an independent-minded filmmaker that has to scratch and claw his film into existence, ‘POV’ is certainly critical,” he says. “I’m not sure as a filmmaker I would have a voice if it were not for ‘POV.’”

While ‘POV’ doesn’t court controversy, it doesn’t shy away from it. It does, however, attempt to foster informed discussion. That was the case with Williams and Whitney Dow’s *Two Towns of Jasper* (2002). In the film, two crews – one black and one white – head to Jasper, Texas to document the aftermath of the murder of James Byrd, Jr., a black man who was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to his death by three white men.

To promote it, ‘POV’ partnered with ABC’s *Nightline* to organize a town hall discussion hosted by Ted Koppel and landed the film’s co-directors a full hour on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The ‘triple network’ approach netted 32 million viewers.

That exposure remains a crowning achievement for EVP and co-EP Cynthia Lopez, who takes a public service announcement-oriented approach to marketing documentaries by identifying a niche audience and taking a discriminating approach to the type of press the filmmakers do to reach it.

“When we first looked at [*Two Towns*] I remember someone asking me, ‘How are you going to promote this film?’” she said. “I said that’s not what we’re going to do. We’re not going to promote the dragging [to] death of a young man. We are going to talk about why this happened.”

Dow, who is talking with ‘POV’ about a *Jasper* sequel, said the experience “helped me to think about the film not as a product but as a piece of a larger puzzle. As the media world becomes more fractured, that’s a more healthy way to think about what you’re doing. If you just think a 90-minute cut is the destination, you’re going to be sorely disappointed in your work.”

Marketing is part of a holistic approach for Lopez and Kilmurray that begins when 'POV' acquires a film for broadcast and continues through its festival run, theatrical distribution window and DVD release.

A campaign for a film can take the form of a bespoke digital initiative that sometimes continues well after the broadcast. Weiss' early forays into the Web were through email listservs such as the one for the Tourette's doc *Twitch and Shout* (1993), which kept the project going for eight years after 'POV' ceded control to users.

Producers then created micro-sites such as "Regarding Vietnam," a digital push for *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (1998) that became a lively forum for debate for veterans and anti-war activists.

Nowadays, the strand aggregates content around issues raised in a film. For *Thirst* (2004), a film about the privatization of water, 'POV' included essays and case studies on its website that were augmented by a response from an umbrella group representing corporations criticized in the film.

"We were able to look at several angles of this issue – even the corporate angle – in a really creative way," says Lopez. Going forward, distributing 'POV' via mobile apps and the Web will be a big focus for PBS.

"It is our default position that we want to make those available to the audience," says John Wilson. "In some cases it's challenging because the filmmaker committed those rights elsewhere in their journey to getting the film done."

"We need to evolve to a shared rights model so that a series can do whatever it wants with the film in the digital realm but we can also do whatever we want with it," offers Kartemquin's Quinn. "Exclusive rights are not where things are going."

But that's another discussion. As for the future of 'POV' and documentary on American television, with print media continuing to suffer cutbacks, Kilmurry sees documentaries carrying the tradition of long-form investigative journalism forward. He now receives upwards of 1,100 submissions per year and noted a marked evolution in quality that he believes is mirrored by the audience's sophistication.

"You're seeing filmmakers who spend three to six years on a subject, and that lends itself to a particular richness, complexity and nuance that you don't get elsewhere," he says.

"Documentary storytelling is becoming another legitimate option in how audiences want to spend their time, alongside narrative films or whatever their entertainment might be. It's another part of their choice."

Jennifer Fox's My Reincarnation opens 'POV's 25th anniversary season on PBS on June 21 at 10 p.m. EST.

'POV' BULLET POINTS:

- The strand is a production of American Documentary, a non-profit multimedia company that explores the potential of independent media in public life.
- Since 1988, 'POV' has presented more than 300 films to public television audiences across the U.S.
- Major funding for 'POV' is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the desJardins/Blachman Fund, and public television viewers.
- 'POV' is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KQED San Francisco, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG.

(Source: www.pbs.org)