



Social movement documentary practices: digital storytelling, social media and organizing

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and activists have studied social movement media for its potential to challenge dominant narratives, build community relationships and create social change. This paper presents a case study of two short-form documentary projects with Black Lives Matter 5280 and the Service Employees International Union, Local 105 in Denver, Colorado to explore how collaborative media-making projects assist in building local grassroots campaigns of racial and economic justice. The communication strategies as well as the distribution efforts via online social networks and community screenings are discussed in order to analyse how documentaries rely upon personal narratives to animate members and allies' feelings and then connect them with traditional forms of organizing like community meetings and public demonstrations. The participatory aspects of filmmaking are viewed through democratic theory, which emphasizes the social relations of citizenship and shared communal values over material and cultural resources, rather than visual aesthetics or technical processes.

KEYWORDS

Social movements;
documentary; social media;
activist media; race; class

Introduction

Social movement media has been studied by scholars and activists for decades, with various terms being applied to both the media content and the practices filmmakers and activists use to produce this media: alternative, community, radical and participatory, to name a few. Rodriguez, Ferron, and Shamas (2014) attempted to bring clarity to this field by suggesting approaches, terms, and practices scholars and community activists might employ when researching, producing and distributing original multimedia content for social justice and grassroots organizing. Most importantly, however, the authors argued that to fully understand both the media production practices and the information and communication technologies

utilized to produce multimedia texts, the practices and technologies must first be situated within their historical, political and socio-economic contexts. Downing (1984) is perhaps most notable for his book *Radical Media* that explored alternative community media practices—from street art to video and radio—and their cultural and political significance; this article, however, relies on a more recent essay from Downing (2008) in which he asks researchers to theorize social movement media as “the complex *sociotechnical* institutions they actually are” (41). While the proliferation of camera-enabled smartphones and social media platforms has done a lot to simplify the production and amplify the distribution of images of racial and economic injustices, studies

of social movement media often misguidedly focus on the technologies themselves with little critical consideration for the socioeconomic and political contexts these practices exist within.

This article, as Downing suggests, avoids a media-centric or techno-utopian analysis of social movement media and, rather, investigates two ongoing, collaborative documentary projects as *sociotechnical* institutions. Since August 2015, I have been shooting, editing and producing short-form documentary films with Black Lives Matter 5280 (BLM5280) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 105 in Denver, Colorado. While these two organizations and their documentary series are separate projects, this article shows how networked movements collaborate, through digital media, with other local grassroots community organizers to share similar messaging and distribution strategies in order to build a broad coalition of working-class people. I analyse the media-making and distribution processes through three key themes, which are discussed further in the next section: digital storytelling, social media as a platform for organizing and multimedia distribution, and participation in documentary film as democratic citizenship. I apply Funke, Robe, and Wolfson's (2012) concept of "media-suturing" to show how processes of filming, editing and distributing media are not "endpoint[s] unto themselves" but ways to build solidarity within and between grassroots community organizations and "re-forg[e] a contemporary working class identity" (17). While the authors describe "media-suturing" within the context of community media centres that offer video production education to organizers so that community members can tell their own stories and challenge dominant media narratives, this article applies media-suturing to the ways in which media texts, the strategies used to distribute them and their communication strategies connect local grassroots groups working towards social justice.

Couldry (2008) situates digital storytelling as "mediation" and encourages scholars to

investigate its potential through empirical research. Mediation, according to Couldry, is a dialectic process of circulation, production and interpretation of media content that effects—and is effected by—social and cultural institutions; this article responds to Couldry through a self-reflective ethnographic study that includes interviews and participant observation as well as a textual analysis of the documentary series. Couldry suggests researchers study digital storytelling as mediation by investigating how the "outputs of digital storytelling practices" are circulated between various sites, practitioners, audiences and institutions (50). Traditional conceptions of documentary film as a 90-minute feature can be somewhat limiting in our contemporary context. Interactive documentaries, 360° video and virtual reality are emerging technologies that are reshaping the documentary genre and the ways in which activist shoot and distribute messages of social justice. The activist media projects examined here show how short films posted regularly online mirror the temporal nature of the movements they depict. Filmmakers—especially those working with limited resources—should be mindful of both the challenges and potentials these production and distribution processes present. Thanks to inexpensive video production tools like DSLR cameras, smartphones and video editing software, documenting everyday life and producing advocacy films is more accessible than ever. Working on flexible deadlines afforded by 24/7 publishing online also allows filmmakers to experiment with stylistic and content decisions. While these aesthetic and technical affordances are important as sites of study, John Grierson wrote in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1939 that the early documentary movement's 'basic force ... was social not aesthetic We were interested in *all* instruments which would crystalize sentiments in a muddled world and create a will toward civic participation' (Grierson and Hardy 1966, 18). Understanding how civic participation was central to the documentary movement reaffirms

the need to study not just the technologies and platforms in which documentary films circulate but also the social components embedded within these *sociotechnical* institutions.

I account for and analyse the role of civic participation in documentary filmmaking by examining three key themes within the short-form documentary series produced in collaboration with BLM5280 and the SEIU, Local 105: (1) The narrative structures these stories rely upon to highlight personal stories of the organizations' members and allies and connect these to broader themes of inequality and communal values; (2) the distribution strategies used to connect various groups working towards racial and economic justice; and (3) the shared citizenship that is required to engage in collaborative documentary projects. By examining the media production processes and expanding my analysis to include the political economy of social media and new communication technologies, this article relies on a critical theoretical approach to activist media that suggests that while social movement organizations (SMOs) are creatively incorporating digital and online activism into campaigns for social justice, these practices are inherently social relations that complement "traditional" forms of organizing like public demonstrations, community meetings and newsletters.

Digital storytelling, personal narrative and social media

The narrative strategies movements use to frame members, allies and campaigns can be viewed through Couldry's (2008) concept of digital storytelling, which he defines as "the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources" (42). By understanding stories as *mediation*, the social and cultural potential of individual stories circulating outside of the mainstream media can be realized. Because stories can elicit emotional responses and connect larger structural and institutional issues

to viewers' everyday lives, filmmakers often rely upon accepted narrative structures that emphasize personalities and individual characters. According to Lambert (2006), '[s]tory sharing and listening creates compassion, and offer a huge dose of humility. While opinions may not change, certainly a deeper civility can be engendered, a kind of civility that is rapidly disappearing from our culture' (xxi). Relying on the empathic potential of personal narratives is certainly a legitimate strategy for filmmakers wishing to connect art and activism but, Couldry cautions, storytelling must be considered alongside the 'unjust distribution of society's resources ... [and] the unequal distribution of "symbolic power"' (2011, 47). Because the mainstream news media often applies conflict frames to SMOs that are episodic in nature (Gitlin 1980), social movements are often faced with how to challenge the dominant, often negative, perceptions associated with their movement.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that the use of digital and social media by SMOs generates *personal action frames* based on individual stories of movement leaders and participants. While these online networks 'cast a broader public engagement net using interactive digital media and easy-to-personalize action themes' (742), they may struggle to realize 'the familiar logic of *collective action*' (743, emphasis added). Papacharissi (2016) describes online hashtags and movements as *affective publics*, which 'serve as storytelling structures that sustain a modality of engagement that is primarily affective' (310). Through exploring the messaging and distribution strategies of the BLM5280 and SEIU documentaries, these texts are understood as affective bridges that utilize personal narrative and visibility in order to animate supporters and allies and build working-class solidarity within and across organizations. The ways in which these narratives are crafted and distributed form what Castells (2011) calls 'counterpower', which is a relational struggle over how dominant paradigms are established, reinforced and resisted.

As SMOs increasingly rely upon social and digital media to produce and distribute creative content, scholars remain sceptical of the egalitarian potential of networked communications and online activism. Dean (2009) challenges the structures of networked communication by defining online advocacy as activities that contribute to communicative capitalism—the ‘participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism’ (2). Dean is especially concerned with how social media, Web 2.0 and other participatory communication models for social justice may further the personalization of politics. While contemporary networked movements have successfully utilized personal action frames to rapidly increase membership and “allow individuals to activate their loosely tied networks” (Bennett 2012, 21), Dean is critical of the celebratory rhetoric activists and scholars use to describe social and digital media’s role in bringing about social justice. Despite the success recent movements have had in introducing new ideas into the public consciousness (e.g. ‘We are the 99%!’), social media’s privileging of personal narrative reinforces a central critique of neoliberalism: it separates the individual from a collective or communitarian approach to social justice (Harvey 2005). Fraser (2000) provides a useful method for viewing the ‘problem of recognition’ (identity politics) with the ‘problem of redistribution’ (economic justice). Rather than separate the two, Fraser proposes a *status model* that

views misrecognition in the context of a broader understanding of contemporary society. From this perspective, status subordination cannot be understood in isolation from economic arrangements, nor recognition abstracted from distribution. On the contrary, only by considering both dimensions together can one determine what is impeding participatory parity in any particular instance. (118–9)

By reviewing the narrative strategies and collaborative nature of participatory documentary

filmmaking, I demonstrate how BLM5280 and the SEIU, Local 105 produced and distributed media that highlighted the commonalities between grassroots organizations, challenged systemic inequalities, and promoted radical political parity grounded in a critique of the fair distribution of social resources and communal values.

Documentary as creative citizenship

Participatory documentary hinges on how filmmakers and researchers define *participation*. To avoid an argument that suggests actors who participate in digital remix and video production somehow capture or create new forms of symbolic and political power, I ground my analysis of participation in democratic theory. Participatory democracy, according to Fuchs (2014), is a ‘society in which all decisions are made by those who are concerned by them and all organizations (workplaces, schools, cities, politics, etc.) are controlled by those who are affected by them’ (14). By considering creative collaboration and participation through the lens of democracy, civic participation within documentary practices is understood not as a Do-it-Yourself project, but, rather, a ‘co-creative’ Do-it-With-Others (DiWO) approach that ‘provides a progressive re-working of documentary’s historic role in the public sphere, as an open space for dialogue and a stage for the performance of citizenship’ (Rose 2014, 203).

Fraser’s (2005) concept of ‘participatory parity’ offers a framework for understanding the performativity and visibility of creative citizenship within collaborative documentary filmmaking. While scholars have questioned whether more participation may in fact fracture new social movements and make building a broad-based political project across identities more difficult, Fraser writes, ‘justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life’ (73). Therefore, participation in collaborative documentaries demands additional ethical considerations for

the relationships between filmmaker and subjects. These considerations should level the filmmaker to a peer in civic life and social justice ally as opposed to a film director or individual actor. Lastly, Graham Murdock offers the ‘central idea of citizenship’, which he argued is ‘the right to participate fully in social life with dignity and without fear, and to help formulate the forms it might take in the future’ (Murdock quoted in Ardizzoni 2013, 323). Regular and thoughtful attention to my role as a filmmaker in relation to my subjects allowed me to produce projects as a citizen-activist and engage in media-making practices that were respectful for both director and interviewees.

Documentary as communication activism research

This work is informed by communication activism research (Frey and Carragee 2007). Intervening in campaigns through documenting rallies and members’ stories, signing petitions and attending community meetings is consistent with the idea that a ‘social justice sensibility entails a moral imperative to *act* as effectively as we can to do something about structural sustained inequalities’ (Frey et al. 1996, 111, emphasis in original). The creative work and theoretically informed research of this project represent my desire to work with marginalized communities and SMOs in order to ‘intervene into unjust discourses and material conditions to make them more just’ (Carragee and Frey 2016, 3976). Documenting rallies through documentary film is one way I am able to share and report on the practices and processes of the local labour union and BLM 5280. Informing my analysis through social and political theories engages this work as well as scholars, journalists and activists in the potential of a mass movement of working-class people coalescing in a shared struggle for economic and racial justice. I approached BLM5280 about a documentary project with some reservation because I was sensitive to what Cole (2012a) called the

‘white-savior industrial complex’. In his critique of *Kony 2012*—a YouTube documentary focused on Joseph Kony and his recruitment and use of child soldiers in Uganda as the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army—Cole examined the problem of white, Western filmmakers who pursue socially minded projects that highlight marginalized communities, often communities of colour, not for the purpose of seeking justice but, rather, to have ‘a big emotional experience that validates [their] privilege’ (2012b). I attended BLM5280 community meetings and introduced myself to organizers and volunteers of the movement because, as Cole suggests, ‘a little due diligence is a minimum requirement’ (2012a, para. 21) for filmmakers and activists working with (or on behalf of) groups with diverse geographic, gender identifying or racial characteristics.

At the first BLM5280 community meeting I attended in August 2015, I met co-lead Bianca Williams and volunteered my services as a documentary filmmaker and photographer and discussed how I thought documentary films could contribute to the organization’s messaging strategies and outreach efforts. Since August 2015, I have produced three short films with BLM5280, all of which were distributed via the group’s Facebook and Twitter pages as well as my personal social media accounts.

At the 21 October 2015 BLM5280 community meeting, I met Andy Jacob, political director for the SEIU, Local 105, and we talked about how the collaboration between the two organizations came together and why connecting racial and economic justice in a public forum was important. ‘[Racial justice is] a tough topic to broach honestly and so we really wanted to make this as accessible to folks as possible’, Jacob said. He hoped having the meeting would ‘help people have a better understanding of the way that race and economics collide and how they’re really intertwined in our society’ (Jacob 2015). After speaking with

Jacob, he introduced me via e-mail with Maria Corral, the Local 105's Communications Coordinator. I explained my intention of producing short-form documentaries featuring the organization's members and how these stories could humanize union members and the Fight for 15 campaign. She agreed to assist with identifying members and placed me in touch with people willing to share their stories and be featured in short documentary films. Detailing my efforts meeting organizers, attending meetings and offering my services as a filmmaker highlight the importance of the relationships that are necessary for activist filmmaking. The first film made with the Local 105 was produced free of charge. After earning the trust of its members and staff, the Local 105 commissioned my work as a filmmaker for subsequent projects. Developing relationships built on trust requires months, if not years, of commitment. Acknowledging my role in the projects and position to the organizations allows me to conduct a nuanced and honest analysis of activist media. Self-reflexivity in ethnographic research that includes participation observation and in-depth interviews is crucial for understanding how long-term, meaningful relationships with subjects are invaluable for gathering thoughtful insights and candid responses into the organizations and their campaigns.

BLM5280: activist media for a networked movement

Black Lives Matter is 'not a moment, but a movement' and, according to its website, 'is a call to action and a response to anti-Black racism that permeates our society' (blacklivesmatter.com nd). The social movement was created in 2012 by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida. #BlackLivesMatter grew 'beyond a social media hashtag'¹ in 2014 after the shooting death of another unarmed black man, 18-year-old Michael Brown, by Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson and

became an international network of social justice activists. This article focuses on the work of the Denver chapter, BLM5280, of the movement and my work as a filmmaker covering the group's public rallies and demonstrations. The documentary practices I conducted with the organization highlight how SMOs utilize media to build and maintain long-term campaigns against systemic racism and economic inequalities, quickly mobilize supporters and community groups for direct actions and public demonstrations, and stand in solidarity with other chapters.

The first film reviewed here is a two-minute piece featuring a demonstration near the Colorado state capitol building on 25 November 2015 (Canella 2015a). I spoke with supporters and organizers of BLM5280 and captured natural sound of participants speaking through a bullhorn expressing their frustration with recent events in Minneapolis. On 18 November 2015, two Minneapolis police officers shot and killed Jamar Clark, an unarmed, 24-year-old Black man. Protesters subsequently sat outside Minneapolis's 4th Precinct, demanding the release of video of the incident. Eight days into the sit-in, five protesters were shot near the precinct, allegedly by a group of white supremacists attempting to intimidate the protesters and the BLM movement.

During the rally in Denver, organizers asked that only people of colour address the crowd of about 100 people, and the video reflected this demand. BLM5280 was established as a safe space by Black people, for Black people, and by reflecting on my position as a white filmmaker, I avoided voiceover narration and created a film that reflected the movement, its members and mission. Because of the evolving nature of this horizontal, networked movement and the sense of urgency it has regarding events of police brutality, this video was shot, produced and distributed via Facebook within four hours. Despite Dean's criticism that social media feeds into our desire for circulation, the immediacy of social media allows BLM5280 to

show support with another chapter—visibly through photos and video—and engage with supporters and other community organizations to quickly mobilize a demonstration. Alex Landau, an ally of BLM5280, told me in an interview before the rally began that events in Minneapolis were intended to elicit fear in the movement for Black lives and the assembly was necessary because ‘we need to stand together stronger than ever in a time like this’.

While gathering in public space was essential for community members wishing to create a venue in which they could express their frustrations concerning the events in Minneapolis (Figure 1), capturing the rally through film and distributing it on social media expanded the spaces in which activists could dialogue with allies and show their solidarity with their partners in Minneapolis. One woman’s comments at the rally powerfully express the need for holding physical spaces. ‘I came out here tonight because I’m hurting, and I wanted to be with community while I hurt’, she said.

I have to go to work and pretend that everything is okay and not necessarily having the space to talk about these things as a person of colour, as a Black woman, as a queer

Black woman I’m hurting, and it’s hard. It’s really hard.

While this comment ended the film on a sensitive note, earlier portions of the film highlight the affective nature of media. Another woman speaking to the assembly through the bullhorn said:

It is not time for you to sit here and pacify your hearts because anger is what gets shit done. And we are upset. I am pissed the hell off! I have to ... sit here and worry about every single child that I look at as some next target for some next cop, for some next white supremacist.

Part of her comments was juxtaposed with an image of a young Black boy listening in the crowd putting a visible face to the frustration that brought many out to the rally. Used together, the narration and image reinforce one of BLM’s central arguments: an end to the state violence that is disproportionately inflicted upon communities of colour. Through the use of upbeat music, quick edits and chants such as ‘The whole damn system is guilty as hell. Indict! Convict! Send those killer cops to jail’, the film creates a sense of immediacy and outrage with the events in Minneapolis.



Figure 1. BLM 5280 rallying in front of the state house for Minneapolis on 25 November 2015, Photo by Author.

For or an organization lacking large financial resources and relying primarily on volunteer support, social media also helps movements remain visible through daily updates, calls to action and consciousness-raising. Prior to attending the solidarity rally for Minneapolis, I viewed a significant amount of user-generated content, primarily on Twitter, posted with hashtags #JamarClark #4thPrecinctShutdown. Our video concluded on a black screen with these hashtags to encourage viewers to engage in the conversations happening around these events, gather more information about the protest and shootings, and share the video of the Denver rally. Several of the clips used in our piece were downloaded, with permission, from Twitter users in Minneapolis and used with credit in the film. Quickly crowd-sourcing material from social media is another benefit Twitter provides activist filmmakers and highlights the participatory and collaborative importance of engaged citizenship. Because many contemporary social movements operate across national and international borders, there is a need to communicate instantly, share information and connect with others who are fighting for similar issues under the same banner. As evidenced through BLM5280's ability to mobilize over 100 supporters to a rally in several hours as well as my ability as a filmmaker to connect the Denver and Minneapolis rallies, through video, social media is an important resource activist filmmakers should utilize for connecting emotion, personal stories and organizing efforts.

The second film reviewed here is a piece that featured a demonstration and rally during the Martin Luther King, Jr. parade in Denver on 18 January 2016 (Canella 2016a). The piece was narrated through use of a speech given at Civic Center Park by Amy E. Brown, co-lead of BLM5280. In this speech, she listed several demands directed at Denver mayor Michael Hancock. The audio was juxtaposed with video of the march in which BLM5280, in collaboration with other local activist groups,

'took over' the city's parade route. Brown began by explaining how BLM5280 did not get permission or permits for its march and was intent on 'reclaiming' Dr King's message of radical political demonstration. 'Because when you reclaim this day and when you reclaim the truth of this day, it's scary as hell', Brown said in her speech. On a day the city likely hoped would be celebrated by the Black community, BLM5280 used the opportunity to highlight local issues disproportionately facing communities of colour: homelessness, criminal justice reform and affordable housing. While this demonstration—and others like it conducted by BLM throughout the United States—may be seen as divisive and polarizing, the protest, and the film that captured the events of the day, connected the radical politics of Dr King with a critique of democracy and access to resources. Demonstrating without permits allowed BLM5280 to claim physical space and challenge an institutional view of politics that favours policy reform. Brown's speech was edited to quick-cut images of demonstrators marching down Colfax Avenue, carrying signs reading #BlackLivesMatter, Which Side Are You On?, and We Are Baltimore, and chanting 'Show me what democracy looks like' through a bullhorn (Figure 2). While both short documentaries utilized an episodic frame to capture MLK Day and the Minneapolis rally, the broader themes depicted in the films were



Figure 2. Alex Landau demonstrating at the MLK Day rally, 18 January 2016, Denver, CO (Photo by Author).

shouting truth to power in a critique of systemic economic inequality and claiming public space in order to stand in solidarity with other chapters and local community organizations. While BLM5280 utilized social media as a distribution and organizing tool, and the films analysed here focus on holding public spaces and expanding that space online through film for these conversations to continue, the SEIU, Local 105 documentaries relied to a greater extent upon personal narratives to connect individual struggles with communal values over economic justice.

The fight for 15 and contract organizing

The SEIU, Local 105 is the Denver chapter of the international labour union representing employees in service industries including fast food, airport, home health-care and janitorial workers. The documentaries produced in this series focus heavily on personal narrative as a way to connect with the larger Fight for 15 campaign. The first documentary analysed here tells the story of Melissa Benjamin, a home health-care worker in Denver (Canella 2015b). She signed an online petition pledging her support for the Fight for 15 campaign and was subsequently contacted by a representative with the SEIU, Local 105 asking if she would like to volunteer with organizers working on the campaign to raise the minimum wage in the city of Denver. She agreed to participate and has since distributed flyers throughout the city, called other health-care workers to encourage them to join this effort, and spoken at public rallies. Photos and video of Melissa's activist work at rallies were included in her film. While paging through the names of potential volunteers Melissa told me, 'People think that getting online and signing a petition is enough. We really we have to stand in a group' (Benjamin 2015). This comment served as a transition into footage of a public demonstration in which protesters held signs, marched in front

of the state capitol building, and declared, 'This is what the people standing up for fifteen feels like!' Melissa's comment also speaks to the limitations of social media and online petitions. While Melissa's film has been shared online, the SEIU has screened the film at community workshops and other local events, emphasizing how documentary film, when distributed with a multi-faceted strategy, can create a bridge between personal stories and collective organizing. The rallies hosted by the labour union and depicted through film offer its members—janitorial and health-care workers who are rarely seen by the public or their employers—a visible space to argue their demands.

Melissa is passionate about her work as a health-care provider, and I was thoughtful in presenting this passion alongside comments about collective bargaining and increasing the minimum wage. I spent one day filming with Melissa and captured her at home with her two daughters, driving to a client's home where she provides homecare service, and her medical care at the client's home. I spoke with Melissa at length about the project before, during, and after filming, described how she would be depicted in the piece, and answered all questions or concerns she had about the project. Melissa explained her reason for participating in the documentary project during our interview. 'I knew people would see it and it might create a spark in them to stand up and say, "This isn't right. This isn't gonna happen to me any more. I'm gonna do whatever I can about it"', she said.

If that's speaking out, attending actions, signing petitions, telling people that there's a Fight for 15 going on in Colorado, I want people to see that and I want people to join in because together we can make a change. (Benjamin 2015)

As Melissa has become an outspoken activist during her time working with the union, it was important that the film depict her story about organizing around the fairness of wages in a hopeful, positive way, rather than a helpless victim (Funke, Robe, and Wolfson 2012).

While Melissa expressed reservations that activist work carries a certain amount of risk because one may be labelled an agitator by friends, family members and employers, I eased Melissa's concerns by explaining that she will receive a private, password-protected link to the first draft of the film before it is publicly distributed on social media or e-mailed to the Local 105's members. While this goes against professional journalistic practice, producing a collaborative documentary with SMOs requires a flattening of the filmmaking hierarchy in line with the shared approach to democratic citizenship. Producer, director, subject and crew are equal in the media-making processes and have a shared responsibility in the production and distribution of the film. I view Melissa as a partner and believe filmmakers who wish to produce activist media should recognize the opportunity this partnership presents, rather than seeing it as a creative obstacle to their 'vision'. As a documentarian, I aim to produce a compelling personal story that will resonate with a sympathetic audience. I complement those personal stories, however, with my work as a researcher that requires fact-based empirical evidence and context to sustain arguments with even the most unsympathetic audiences.

While the second SEIU, Local 105 film I will review features a rally on 15 June 2016 for the Justice 4 Janitors (J4J) campaign, interviews and comments from other rallies are included in my analysis to show the ongoing nature of campaign organizing. This campaign focused on negotiations for 2,400 janitors who were working under 27 different contracts and demanding improved health-care options and a pathway to \$15 per hour through a new 'Master Contract' (Canella 2016a). I interviewed numerous janitors and union staff at the rallies to ask why they were demonstrating in the streets. Jesus Cervantes, an internal organizer with the Local 105, said they needed to let the public in the downtown business district as well as the companies they are negotiating with see who these janitors are (Figure 3). 'We wanted to put an actual face to those members, to that movement', he said. 'We want them to see that they are real people, that they have families, they want their kids to go to college' (Cervantes 2016). The short film featuring the demonstration on 15 June included Spanish subtitles because a majority of the Local 105's members are Spanish-only speakers. By doing this, our film highlights the collaborative and social nature of documentary film and how organizers engage their members and a broader



Figure 3. SEIU, Local 105 marching in the #Fightfor15 on 14 April 2016, Photo by Author.

community of activists with media. Similar to the ways natural sound and quick edits were utilized in the BLM5280 films, the J4J campaign film incorporated audio from a marching band demonstrating with the union and its supporters and spliced images of the march to match the timing of its beat. This helped to generate a sense of immediacy in the viewer and present urgency around the fact that union members were prepared to strike if a new contract was not agreed upon by the deadline.

While the majority of the SEIU, Local 105 members are Latino/a, Sasha Ramirez, co-lead of BLM5280, attended a J4J rally and spoke to the significance of connecting organized labour with racial justice. She said that it is crucial BLM5280 shows up publicly to stand in solidarity with working-class communities of colour. ‘Economic justice, the ability or the inability to live successfully on a minimum wage affects mostly black and brown communities’, she said. ‘Racial justice and economic justice are inextricably linked in that way’ (Ramirez 2016).

The three-minute short film was distributed primarily via social media, and Corral discussed in an interview how the union has been conducting social media trainings with its members. During one such workshop on the morning of the 15 June rally, she said the members were met with negative comments about the #Fightfor15 and labour unions. I asked what her strategy was for dealing with opposing views. ‘Luckily we have a great progressive community here and they got on board and actually began balancing out the negative and the positive messages, which is awesome’, she said. ‘We try to use social media as positive and educational media’ (Corral 2016). This again speaks to the limitations of social media, as it is often a space in which users filter information to adhere to preconceived beliefs (Sears and Freedman 1967).

Following its multi-faceted campaign that included local organizing with activist groups, public demonstrations, distributing flyers in the community, posting original multimedia online and working with city officials, the

union secured a contract prior to the 2 July 2016 deadline. This contract was ratified by 98% of the union’s members and included health-care premiums at no increased cost to members and a pathway to \$15-per-hour by 2020. Lucia Melgarejo, property services director with the Local 105, explained at a celebration of the contract ratification at the union headquarters that the Fight for 15’s message has been successful, in part, because it has connected personal stories with communal struggles. Melgarejo joined the union after working for 10 years as a janitor. Her experiences as an immigrant and single mother inform her passion for social justice, and she spoke about the importance of the contract with tears in her eyes. ‘We do usually humanize because this is the human side of the workers, this is not about a money machine’, she said. ‘This is about human beings that deserve to be treated with respect.’ The value of union members and other community organizations working together across racial, economic and social lines was key to the janitor’s success, according to Melgarejo.

I think we all share the same issues at the end. Especially for women, especially for minorities, especially for immigrants, it’s a constant fight and it’s never going to end. But we have to stand up and make our voice heard The only way that we are all going to come together and get results is standing up together. Make it one united fight. (Melgarejo 2016)

Using the momentum the Local 105 generated from this campaign, it hosted political education workshops and meetings focused on informing members and the community about local candidates and ballot initiatives in the November 2016 election. The union organized heavily around Amendment 70, which would raise the minimum wage in Colorado to \$12 per hour by 2020. The amendment passed with 54.6% of the vote (Svaldi 2016), showing that campaign organizing distributed online through media works in concert with local

community meetings. Collaborative documentary projects, social media and digital storytelling are one component local grassroots organizations might consider for fostering democratic political participation.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed two documentary projects with BLM5280 and the SEIU, Local 105 to examine the communication and distribution strategies of activist media and participatory filmmaking as democratic citizenship. These projects share several characteristics in that they are collaborative, ongoing and distributed primarily via social media. The distribution strategies social movements and activist media-makers rely on, however eased they may be by Web 2.0 platforms, will continue to present challenges. Getting your message heard on YouTube, for example, a site that sees 400 hours of content uploaded per minute is a struggle (Brouwer 2015). This analysis has deliberately avoided statistics concerning views, 'Likes', and shares of the BLM5280 and SEIU, Local 105 films. As documentarians are increasing relying on funding from institutions that quantitatively measure 'impact' and potential 'virality', this article aims to show that social media and digital technologies must be viewed in relation to community organizing and relationship-building efforts activists employ to bridge shared struggles of racial and economic justice. Filmmakers, therefore, should avoid replicating popular narratives and format tropes and focus instead on how these mediated texts animate and enhance local relationships and contribute to reaffirming campaign messages.

BLM5280 and the SEIU, Local 105 use a hybrid approach when fighting systemic racism and the socioeconomic and political oppression of communities of colour. Distributing campaigns through social media and documentary film is a part of this approach. By visibly promoting solidarity with other chapters and

local community groups in public venues, collaborating to host public meetings and film screenings, staging demonstrations and rallies, producing documentary films, and developing relationships with elected officials, BLM5280 and the SEIU, Local 105 illuminate how activist media is one component for achieving radical democratic parity that eschews individual-level goals. Documentary films and the social media platforms used to distribute these texts will not alone bring about an end global economic and social inequalities; but using cultural production to frame, re-frame, develop, and distribute messages of social justice serves as a way to capture symbolic power, bridge the ideological divides between working-class people, and build a progressive political project.

Note

1. #BlackLivesMatter, when used as a hashtag, is used in this paper to refer to social media-related activities such as calls to action, announcements, or showing solidarity with other chapters, while 'Black Lives Matter' is used to refer to the movement as a whole and its offline organizing efforts and campaigns. Making this distinction clearly is somewhat difficult as social media is intimately connected to the movement's outreach and messaging strategies.

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