

Youth Documentary Academy: The social practices of filmmaking and media advocacy

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Abstract

Youth Documentary Academy (YDA) is a seven-week documentary workshop in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Through ethnographic research and collaborative filmmaking, I examine documentary production and exhibition as social practices that foster meaningful relationships between media makers and community organisations working for social justice. Between November 2016 and July 2018, I conducted 20 interviews with current and former YDA filmmakers, faculty and community organisers. Many YDA filmmakers produced films through first-person point-of-view testimonials, which explored intimate details of their lives and the issues facing their families and communities. Although this narrative style may individualise systemic injustices, I argue that the affective nature of filmmaking and film exhibition, and the partnerships that YDA developed with community organisations, helped youth realise an advocacy role. For filmmakers, the empathic dialogues that emerged at public screenings of YDA films illuminated the way media have the potential to foster solidarity.

Keywords

Community media, connective media, digital storytelling, documentary, film exhibition, media production, youth media

Introduction

Documentary filmmaker Tom Shepard founded Youth Documentary Academy (YDA) in 2013 to provide youth in Colorado Springs, Colorado with a creative outlet to tell stories. Since then, more than 50 students have graduated from the program and produced documentaries on topics ranging from race and racial stereotypes, immigration, teen suicide prevention to LGBTQ+ justice and bullying. YDA is an intensive seven-week summer filmmaking workshop that teaches students all aspects of documentary production. The 2018 program was unique in that youth participants developed and produced 'impact and engagement campaigns' that utilised past films to connect YDA with local community organisations, spurred dialogue and community conversations about the issues raised in these films and promoted YDA's 2019 television series with the Rocky Mountain Public Broadcasting Service (RMPBS).

This article explores the social practices of documentary filmmaking to understand how media production and distribution connected youth to community organising for social change. Research has examined how community media help youth to find a voice, become civically engaged and challenge dominant narratives, with much of this research focusing on the

production of media, with little regard for the distribution and exhibition of film (see Lomax et al., 2011; Mhando, 2005; Sandercock & Attili, 2010). This study contributes to this literature by focusing on how YDA filmmakers, through hosting public screenings and engaging in discussions and dialogue with audiences of their films, realised a role as advocates or ambassadors for the issues raised in their films. I worked with YDA as a video editor and instructor each summer from 2015 to 2018, which allowed me to see YDA mature from a young non-profit organisation into an established community partner, and to study the long-tail distribution efforts of independent community filmmakers.

Theoretical framework

Filmmakers rely on stories to elicit emotional responses from audiences and connect structural and institutional issues to viewers' lives. To achieve emotional resonance, filmmakers often rely on accepted narrative structures that emphasise individual personalities or characters – for example, the lone hero or heroine, the villain or the victim. Although these tropes may be problematic, they simplify complex subjects and help viewers to empathise with and relate to characters. According to Lambert (2006: xxi), 'Story 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'. Relying on the empathic potential of personal narratives is certainly a legitimate strategy for filmmakers wishing to connect art to social justice, but Couldry (2011: 47) cautions that storytelling must be considered alongside the 'unjust distribution of society's resources ... [and] the unequal distribution of "symbolic power"'. Independent documentarians working within a community media centre, therefore, must recognise the limitations of storytelling. YDA leveraged stories to foster relationships among youth filmmakers at the workshop, and between YDA and local community partners. These relationships were essential for organising screenings of YDA films and for connecting the films' messages to community groups fighting for social change.

Producing documentary films to critique social injustices and mobilise allies also raises interesting questions about whose voices are privileged for distribution. Couldry (2006) encourages scholars to develop a media ethics that recognises the agency of people *listening* to stories. Couldry (2006: 96) encourages scholars to partner with media practitioners to challenge symbolic and social inequalities that are, he argued, 'partly questions of media organisation' but 'also questions of value, requiring a change of priority over which sources are allowed to contribute to the images and information flows we receive as tokens of the world's events, and which are not'. By relying on first-person point-of-view narratives, YDA filmmakers contest whose voices are prioritised for distribution by commercial news media outlets and cultural institutions. Listening requires an informed, engaged citizenry willing to watch films with empathy and thoughtfully engage in conversations about the topics raised in them, which may be idealistic at a time of political polarisation due to social and economic instability. If community media practitioners and filmmakers wish to create and distribute messages of social justice, and organise, through media, however, then a sensitivity for the positionality of all participants provides an ethical lens through which to examine media power (Fenton, 2016).

Screening films in public spaces to spur conversation and promote change speaks to media's ability to connect seemingly disparate issues and communities. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) offer the concept of *connective action* to discuss how social movements utilise personal stories of movement actors to connect members and allies to systemic and structural issues. They argue that contemporary movements (such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring), which rely heavily on digital media tools and social media platforms to produce and disseminate multimedia, often craft *personal action frames* based on the stories of movement leaders. These personal action frames then form 'digitally enabled action networks' (2012: 742), or *connective*

networks. Although connective networks may ‘cast a broader public engagement net’, they struggle to realise ‘the familiar logic of collective action’ (2012: 742–3). Sharing personalised messages via social media helps organisers to reach large numbers of people quickly and in a variety of geographic locations; but Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 748) conclude that organisers do not believe media play a significant role in ‘altering the fundamental principles of organizing collectives’.

Critiquing the potential of stories through media power is necessary when analysing YDA because community media practices – for example, interviewing family and friends, editing video and organising screenings with subsequent question-and-answer sessions – are social processes that complement and enhance traditional community organising tactics, such as petitions, canvassing and protests. Arguing that filmmaking is a series of relational social processes emphasises how media production and distribution have the potential to foster meaningful connections among community organisations.

Building on Downing’s (2001) theorisation of radical media, Atton (2002: 24) asks scholars to interrogate the communicative practices of community media because:

Any model must consider not simply the differences in content and medium/carrier (and its dissemination and delivery) but how communication as a social (rather than simply an informational) process is construed ... What is radical about the communication processes (as instances of social relations) employed by that media?

Situating ‘the social’ as fundamental to the production and distribution of community media is in line with what John Grierson (1939: 122) wrote about the early documentary movement. Its ‘basic force’, he argued, ‘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.’

Although it is important to consider narratives, understanding how the social processes inherent in filmmaking were central to the early documentary movement reaffirms the need to examine not only YDA filmmakers’ stories or the media-production tools that filmmakers used to produce them, but also the social aspects of this work. Digital media tools may be alluring sites of study because they afford filmmakers with the ability to shoot and edit professional-looking films quickly and at very little cost. But focusing on *the social* within filmmaking reveals the relational and material nature of knowledge production, identity formation and conflict negotiation (Wenger, 1998).

Methodology

YDA emphasises collaboration throughout all stages of its filmmaking workshop: concept, production, writing, editing and post-production, and finally distribution and exhibition. I therefore approached my filmmaking, instruction and research as collaborative co-research informed by democratic theory.¹ Since the emergence of digital media tools and social media platforms in the mid-2000s, media studies scholars have argued that creating original multimedia has the potential to promote civic participation, claim symbolic power and promote youth civic engagement (Chau, 2010; Jenkins, 2006). Promoting democratic participation, however, demands that scholars recognise who has the ability to participate, who sets the terms of participation and what technical and educational affordances are required to do so. Democratic participation then requires creating a context in which ‘all decisions are made by those who are concerned by them’ (Fuchs, 2014: 14).

By democratising filmmaking, YDA represents a ‘co-creative’ do-it-with-others (DIWO) community workshop (Rose, 2014). Utilising shared decision-making, and encouraging communal responsibility for content and outcomes, 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’ (2014: 203). Recognising filmmaking and community media

research as collaborative social processes provides researchers and participants with opportunities to contest social power and to emphasise the agency of all participants (Gadihoke, 2003).

I worked with YDA each summer as a video editor and instructor from 2015 to 2018, and I was paid an hourly rate for this work. During the 2018 workshop, in which students produced impact and engagement campaigns, 20 interviews were conducted with YDA filmmakers, community partners and staff. Interviews were conducted on camera because, in addition to being included in this research, they provided multimedia content for the impact and engagement campaigns and for the 2019 RMPBS series. Each 30-minute episode in the RMPBS series included two YDA films and a brief concluding segment with filmmaker interviews. Many interviews were conducted by YDA students participating in the 2018 program, with guidance from staff and myself. Interviews lasted between 20 and 55 minutes, were transcribed using an online transcription service and were then reviewed by me 'by hand' for themes. YDA filmmakers have promoted their films publicly at community screenings, educational conferences, film festivals and within the RMPBS series. They are therefore identified here by name.²

I had extensive conversations with YDA director Tom Shepard prior to 2018, discussing how film can be a catalyst for social and political change. Shepard described the difficulties he faces as a documentary filmmaker and director of a community media workshop, because he is often asked by funding partners and grant-writing agencies to 'define impact'. These conversations focused my interview questions on how the social aspects of film production and distribution impact community organising. Rather than quantifying impact, I utilised in-depth interviews and participant observation in workshop classes, at community screenings and in the edit room with students to understand how community media are relational processes that connect grassroots organisations. I shared an initial draft of this article with my partners at YDA, which allowed for feedback, revisions and shared editorial control of the research findings and analysis.

Findings

YDA filmmakers, parents and allied community organisers discussed a range of issues about their experiences of producing and exhibiting films. Three key themes emerged that further an understanding of community media as social practices and connective media. First, by fostering a culture of respect and care, YDA encouraged youth filmmakers to collaborate with their peers on the production and exhibition of their films. The second theme was the importance of affective storytelling and the documentary form. Finally, it became clear that the community conversations that followed the screenings of films helped youth to realise an advocacy role. These themes are discussed in the following sections and highlight how film production and distribution can promote empathy and meaningful engagement in local politics and community organising.

Creating a culture of care

The first few weeks of YDA workshops consist of story circles, ice-breaker games and introductory lessons about documentary production. YDA serves traditionally under-represented youth from working class backgrounds, and these students often enter the program with traumatic life and familial experiences that they wish to express through film. Before capturing video or scheduling interviews, though, YDA creates an environment in which youth feel comfortable openly discussing issues such as teen suicide, bullying, intimate partner violence, and racism. Through what Shepard called 'democratic spirit', faculty and staff fostered a 'radical ethics of care' in the classroom, based on mutual respect, open dialogue, and shared ownership of the space (Jeppesen & Media Action Research Group, 2018: 10). The democratic spirit of YDA is realised, for example, through check-ins at the beginning of classes and by collectively creating and agreeing on classroom ground rules. YDA filmmakers said a culture of care that developed organically allowed them to engage in difficult and uncomfortable conversations with their peers, produce films about

extremely personal stories, and then have the confidence to exhibit these films in front of audiences.

Isabella Recca, whose film *Bella* detailed her personal struggles with self-image and feminine beauty standards, discussed how the first few weeks of the workshop were invaluable for her experience in summer 2016:

When you're sitting in a corner and you're brainstorming ideas, practically everyone breaks down in tears in the first week. Even though you barely know each other, you see yourselves in other people and you see that there's a struggle, and I think it's important to find it.

Identifying struggle and finding the words to communicate it in small groups are important social practices for documentary filmmaking, but are often overlooked by media workshops that focus on the technical aspects of shooting and editing video. The emotions that often come out during the story circles and brainstorming sessions reveal how affect influences the pre-production of documentary. Most YDA faculty are not trained in managing trauma, but YDA partners with a counsellor, who assists youth filmmakers in navigating the emotional excavation of their personal stories.

Exploring their shared struggles in a supportive communal environment encouraged youth to be vulnerable in sharing their emotions, and allowing them to guide the production of their films (Kidd, 2003). YDA filmmaker Andy Kwiatkowski, whose 2016 film *Lonely Highway* explored his experiences as a youth with autism, said the diversity of life experiences that YDA filmmakers brought to the program allowed him to understand his story in relation to his peers. 'It was such a community-based support group, that we all come from different walks of life and everyone has a story to tell of an issue that they faced,' he said. These issues are better discussed after trust among the youth, and between the youth and faculty, is earned. The initial weeks of YDA were essential for youth filmmakers crafting stories that sought to make their issues and communities visible. Isabella said, 'I think it's important to find communities where you feel safe enough to just let go of all those barriers that are hiding you from your friends or your family.'

Removing the judgement of friends and family to tell one's story authentically was something that Bobette Faux, mother of 2017 YDA filmmaker Samuel Faux, said was invaluable for her son. Samuel's film *Twice Exceptional* focuses on speech apraxia, a disability that makes it difficult for him to verbalise his thoughts. It was produced using a first-person point-of-view narrative, in which he speaks directly to the camera. His mother said this style allowed Samuel to express himself with 'no judgement':

The camera is not giving you a facial response. The camera's not questioning your motives or critiquing what you're saying. It's an inanimate object, and you get to just talk and say whatever it is you need to say. And you just have this ability to open up.

Many YDA filmmakers discussed how speaking into the camera served as a confessional, devoid of outside interference. Dee Contreras's 2016 film *Broken Silence* portrayed her experiences in a violent intimate partner relationship and her subsequent suicide attempts. Speaking about these experiences with family or friends prior to YDA was difficult, she said, because she had been taught as a child to 'cherish your life and your loved ones'. Being open in conversation with family and friends about her suicide attempts made her feel 'like a disappointment' for what she did. Talking about these experiences on camera, however, 'made it easier because I didn't have to sit face-to-face [with someone] and tell what I was doing'.

The social dynamics of YDA productions were altered fundamentally by introducing cameras and audio equipment. One way that cameras shifted the social, Bobette said, was by 'level[ing] the playing field' between interviewer and interviewee. With the assistance of his YDA

peers serving as lighting and sound technicians, Samuel interviewed his mother about his speech apraxia. She explained:

That's when my emotions came up, because ... it was just the two of us talking. It wasn't a hierarchical situation where I'm the mom and I'm in charge and you're the kid.

Researchers have studied the impact of cameras on ethnographic fieldwork (Henley, 1998; Schrum, Duque & Brown, 2005), and Bobette's comment is a key insight for researchers and filmmakers pursuing non-hierarchical co-research and collaborative community media productions.

Providing youth with a public platform from which they are able to creatively and emotionally express themselves is crucial for analysing the power imbalances of social and political life. Bobette reflected on how youth voices are often viewed as lacking the credibility and authority required to speak on important social and political issues. Recent activism following the February 2018 mass shooting in Parkland, Florida does, however, suggest that this mentality is shifting. Youth activists today are producing vlogs, memes and short videos, and are leveraging social media to disseminate original multimedia and organise rallies. Bobette pointed out, however, that they are 'often missing the why. Why am I doing this? What purpose is my film trying to achieve? What message am I actually trying to send out?' Creating an affective communal space grounded in mutual support, radical care and listening, according to Bobette, suggests that community media workshops have the potential to offer 'an incredible opportunity to grow both in advocacy and also in self-expression for youth today'.

Affective storytelling and the form of film

The emotional labour and mutual support that direct the first few weeks of YDA do not end when films move into production. The community of care that YDA filmmakers and staff create inform the narratives of the films. YDA filmmakers described how the documentary form allowed them to tell compelling stories by visually representing their subjects. Samuel said his story about speech apraxia was best told through film because 'it gave it a more personal feel. I made it so that everyone can see that people aren't necessarily how you see them at face value.' The relatability of narrative storytelling, he said, was important because it allowed him to deliver his subject in a format that made speech apraxia accessible to a general audience. Bobette said that YDA allowed her son to experiment with various forms and narrative styles, and this kind of creativity is not afforded to youth in school because so much of learning is quantified. 'There are so many societal rules about what's right, what's wrong, and in film there is no right and wrong, there just is,' she said. It is not that there are no norms in filmmaking, but as Shepard says, YDA encourages youth to 'play in the sandbox'. This means understanding basic photographic and video editing principles, but still having the creative freedom and artistic flexibility to know when to ignore them.

Collaborating with their peers in the 'sandbox', throughout the writing, post-production and screening of their films, helped YDA filmmakers to realise how the medium of film could powerfully convey the emotions that were expressed during pre-production. Cody McIntyre, whose 2015 documentary *From Closed to Open?* explored his experiences of finding a family to open-adopt his child, said that although books and print-based media effectively deliver information, 'film definitely brings out [the emotion] more, because you get to see it, you get to feel it, it doesn't feel disconnected'. Cody described film as 'a very visual art style' that is able to convey complexity because viewers can relate to individual stories of people affected by the themes discussed.

Andy Kwiatkowski said documentary was an ideal format for discussing his experiences of living with autism because film visualises issues that are invisible:

You can get a sense of, wow, this guy experienced stuff I never even knew existed. He's given us a visual aspect of it by telling it through his own personal life, with his challenges, and actually showing maybe even footage of what he experienced.

Isabella Recca reiterated the importance of visual communication in film, saying documentary reached people where and how they consumed news and information: 'I find that in today's day and age, people seem to absorb information best when it's in image form – especially film.' Exploring feminine beauty standards and self-image, she said, was 'a very visual story', so film was also a practical decision: 'It's not something you can just sort of describe on a piece of paper, since it's about looks and visual appearances.'

Victoria Stone, executive director of Pikes Peak Justice and Peace Commission (PPJPC), a community advocacy organisation in Colorado Springs, said documentary provided an additional benefit in that it balanced emotional, character-driven stories with information. She said every YDA film she had seen at community screenings had brought her to tears because she discovered that she unexpectedly shared commonalities with youth. After absorbing her initial affective response, Victoria said she then walked away feeling educated:

Documentaries just tend to give credit to things a little more seriously. When you watch a documentary, you're like, 'Oh, I watched a documentary.' It's not just watching Netflix.

Victoria said working as a community organiser at a small non-profit and being a mother is time consuming. Therefore, the eight- to 12-minute format of YDA films delivers a lot of content in a digestible package that fits her schedule. In addition to the high production values of YDA films, she said, 'You feel like you're smarter or you're watching for educational purposes, [it's] not just mindless entertainment.' Using film as a teaching tool was one of the reasons she partnered with YDA to screen two films at a PPJPC community meeting, a screening that is discussed further in the next section.

I asked Moses Herman, a YDA filmmaker whose 2015 film *Aftermath* explored his conflicted relationship with his biological brother after they were removed from an abusive and neglectful home, to define impact. He said the impact of filmmaking was intricately connected with the affective nature of documentary because visualising the trauma of a complicated family relationship produces an emotional context that allows for perspective taking:

I think when you're making a documentary film, impact is key, and you have to see what you're feeling, what your perspective is, and how that affects people.

Moses, who is attending film school in Colorado, discussed the balance storytellers must strike, between forcefully delivering the message they want audiences to receive and crafting emotion through scenes that are open to interpretation:

You need to learn how to convey [your perspective as a filmmaker]. To truly touch people and give them a lasting impression, let them learn from the situation and take away what they want to take away, while explaining your side of it.

Community conversations and engagement

Most YDA filmmakers did not enter the program intending to make an advocacy film or to be an activist for the issues raised in their film. Most simply wanted to learn technical media production skills and express a personal story through film. Partnering with community organisations to host screenings, however, shows YDA filmmakers that documentary, according to YDA filmmaker Dan Robinson, can be 'a vehicle for social change by being a conversation starter'. Dan's 2017 film *White Chocolate* explored race and racial stereotypes by delving into his personal experiences as an African American youth being called 'white' by his peers. Dan explained how producing a

documentary was, for him, an important first step in realising social change because he needed to raise awareness about an issue that many people did not know existed:

If you just say that there's an issue and you don't give any type of proof, they're (audiences) going to think that issue is non-existent or it isn't an issue at all, it's just a minor inconvenience. But if you're able to put it in a documentary, you showed that it is something important, and that it is something that needs to be addressed. Documentary has that type of power, and I've seen it at first hand.

The first-hand experience Dan refers to here comprised several community screenings of *White Chocolate*, where he participated in a question and answer session following the film. One of these screenings occurred during YDA's 2018 summer program, and was organised by a group of YDA filmmakers producing an impact and engagement campaign for Dan's film. *White Chocolate* was promoted in the campaign with another YDA film, *Shade*, which explored the tensions between light-skinned and dark-skinned African American women. The impact team organised the screening with Victoria Stone at PPJPC to help develop an understanding of how youth audiences respond to the films and what questions the films raised.

Victoria hosted Dan and the YDA impact team during one of PPJPC's bi-weekly meetings, where youth from the area participate in educational programs and arts workshops at a community centre. Victoria said she was impressed by how Dan's presentation empowered African American youth to envision themselves as directors and media producers. 'I think a lot of times [youth] are taught in society, I would argue especially people of colour, that they wait for the person in power to speak,' Victoria said. The conversation that followed Dan's film was wide-ranging and touched on identification with and within the African American community, Blackness and authenticity, and film production. At the conclusion of the discussion, the YDA impact team conducted interviews with youth participants, which were later edited together to create a short video for their impact campaign. Dan stood off-camera during these interviews and, at the end of each one, had meaningful interactions with members of the youth group, who shook hands with Dan and thanked him for communicating experiences that they too have had. Interpersonal exchanges like these exemplify how film exhibition and media production (e.g., interviews) in community settings move alternative media beyond what Shepard called 'marketing' and are, rather, 'engagement' based on social relationships. Hosting a discussion was crucial to introducing youth to local organising, Victoria said, because 'social justice is multifaceted'. She said building a collective group of progressive allies to advocate for gun control, criminal justice reform and public education was challenging because, although these fights may appear unrelated, they are connected:

One thing that we're trying to do is get all the activist groups and communities together, because I might be fighting this issue over here, they might be fighting this issue over there, but if we band together based on the intersections of our issues, how much more power would we have?

For many YDA filmmakers, highlighting the intersections of social justice happened after they had screened their films, when they realised that others shared similar experiences. YDA filmmaker Dee Contreras, whose documentary depicted her personal story of intimate partner violence and suicide, said exhibiting her film let her know her experiences did not exist in isolation:

It's amazing to see what my film does that connects me to so many people. Hearing people cry about it makes me smile, just because it impacts people deeply. These are conversations not a lot of people are willing to have.

Moses Herman also emphasised how documentary exhibition helped connect him with people who could relate to his story of neglect and foster care:

Strangers that I didn't even know approached me and talked to me saying that they related, and that was such a big deal to me – just to be able to communicate with people in the same situation because you feel like you're in the dark, but really, you're not.

Documentary film, Moses argued, introduces viewers to ideas, experiences, and people they may not otherwise encounter. 'Documentary is all about perspective,' he said. When you have only ever seen 'things from your own point of view, that's the only perspective you have, so it can be hard to maybe feel sympathetic towards someone else'.

Providing a space for open dialogue where audiences can engage in conversations about sensitive topics is one of the most important aspects of documentary, according to YDA filmmaker Samuel Faux:

I think it can open up the conversation by just letting people know it's okay to talk about these things in an appropriate setting. It will help people to know the facts and know some people who have challenges.

Bobette Faux, Samuel's mother, said her son was reluctant to talk about his speech apraxia prior to making his documentary, but through making and screening the film, he had 'found a voice in advocacy that I don't think he ever even knew he wanted to have'. Samuel and Andy Kwiatkowski, whose film explored his life as a youth with autism, have screened their films throughout Colorado, for educators and medical professionals, in order to raise awareness about youth living with disabilities. Through screening their films at regional film festivals and conferences, Andy and Samuel hope that their personal stories will improve disability services for youth with disabilities. Having conversations about mental health and public policy can be challenging, Andy said, because it is a 'big, big issue', but communicating the issue through film made it more accessible and humanised autism.

Antreise Lacey, whose 2015 film *Shade* portrayed the tension between light-skinned and dark-skinned women within African American communities, agreed that documentary creates empathic spaces to share in dialogue, but said these spaces could also be an important opportunity to engage in political education and introduce historical perspectives:

With any conversation, it's uncomfortable at first, but it's about doing research before going in, so you are prepared. Read books, and if you have someone that is part of that community, don't be afraid to go to them as a resource and confide in them.

Making and exhibiting her documentary encouraged Antreise to learn more about the legacy of race in the United States, which shows how youth can develop and shape their political subjectivities through community media production and distribution.

Although film production and exhibition encouraged Antreise to dig deeper into her topic, uploading her film online inspired Shaienne Knox to build on this conversation. Shaienne applied to be a YDA filmmaker in 2016 after seeing the reaction *Shade* received at her high school. Following the release of *Shade* on her school district's website, Shaienne noticed that 'there was definitely a little spark in our community': 'You'd be at events and people would be talking about [Lacey's] film, and they were like, "Oh, I had no idea that this was a problem."' Shaienne built on this conversation and produced *Out of Our Heads*, a film about the complexity of black women's hair and how it historically has determined the 'different roles that African American women play'. For her film, Shaienne interviewed her grandmother, who discussed wearing an Afro in the 1960s, and her experiences with the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. Through documentary filmmaking, Shaienne and Antreise furthered their understanding of racial identity and situated their new knowledge in its historical, political and social contexts. By engaging in public discussions about race and racial stereotypes following the screenings of their

films, these filmmakers challenged dominant representations of blackness, spurred their political education and encouraged others to share stories about racial representations.

Victoria Stone applauded the work of Dan, Antreise and Shaienne, and said that as a woman of colour, she knew organising for racial justice demanded a great deal of courage and vulnerability. She encouraged YDA to continue partnering with community organisations willing to screen *White Chocolate*, *Shade* and *Out of Our Heads* to diverse audiences, because the 'dynamics [of race] play out a little bit different depending on who's in the room. I think it's complex, depending on how you shape the room.' YDA continued hosting screenings of *White Chocolate* with Dan and the impact team for his film throughout the autumn of 2018, with audiences around Colorado Springs. In the lead-up to the premiere of YDA's RMPBS series, YDA emailed supporters notifying them of a screening of *White Chocolate* and several other films at a public media centre in Colorado Springs. The films were followed by a question-and-answer session with a Professor of Women's and Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. These efforts represent what Whiteman (2004) calls the 'coalition model' of documentary film, in which filmmakers focus on the social processes of distribution to realise social change. Whiteman (2004: 66) argues that impact is 'related to the creativity and aggressiveness that groups exhibit in reaching grassroots audiences and in creating the spaces in which to present the documentary'. Victoria, who played a key role in building an early distribution network for Dan's film, noted how film is an ideal medium for broaching conversations about race, immigration, and LGBTQ+ justice. Relying on personal stories was powerful, she argued, but these YDA films resonated for her because they 'leant themselves to common denominators' that allowed her to 'see a piece of me' in each story.

Connecting common denominators through screenings and community conversations was central to a question facing filmmakers and faculty producing the 2018 impact and engagement campaigns: should the goal of the campaigns be to get people to watch the films, or to change viewers' understandings about the issues raised in the films? YDA filmmaker Isabella Recca, whose documentary *Bella* portrayed her shaving her head as a rejection of feminine beauty standards, spoke to this tension, and she encouraged filmmakers to balance their expectations of what one text could do:

I think it's too much to ask people to think a certain way. I think, however, it's important to try to change the cultural norms for what is decided to be beautiful or not beautiful. I think that's a discussion that needs to be had. The media, especially, plays a huge impact on how people perceive beauty. And this film plays into that.

Isabella's quote captures a central contradiction with media-making for social justice: although media shape social and cultural norms, media representations alone do not change the way people think. The 2018 impact and engagement teams navigated this contradiction by leveraging YDA's archive to connect with community partners and stimulate difficult discussions about family, mental health, race and religion.

Conclusions

YDA may have begun as a community media workshop seeking to provide youth from under-represented communities with opportunities to learn media production skills and express themselves artistically; however, with the implementation of impact and engagement campaigns in 2018, YDA grew into a community partner in which youth introduced and visualised, through media, issues that had previously remained unsaid and unseen. This study encourages scholars and community media practitioners to focus on the social practices inherent in film production and distribution. Utilising these social dynamics to create public venues where citizens can participate meaningfully in empathic conversations about social and political life should be at the heart of community media. Fostering communal spaces built on care, conducting interviews with

family members and stakeholders, and working with community partners to host film screenings and candid discussions about the issues raised in those films were key to helping YDA filmmakers realise documentary production and exhibition as social justice advocacy and activist media.

This article has intentionally avoided a deeper visual or narrative analysis of YDA's films in order to focus on the social relationships that are fostered through film production and distribution. It should be noted, however, that most YDA films rely on a common visual storytelling motto: *show, don't tell*. Rather than using a lot of voiceovers or interviews, YDA films typically employ dramatic music and long shots that allow the story and its characters opportunities to 'breathe' (Zoetl, 2013). In the contemporary political moment in 2019, when dialogue is often contentious and people enter into conversations about social and political issues with the goal of defeating a perceived opponent, these production techniques slow down the rapid pace of contemporary media, showcase authoritative youth voices and promote listening.

The findings presented here do not suggest that YDA's model will be beneficial for all community media workshops; rather, this article makes four key interventions:

- 1 media studies scholars should focus on the communicative practices of alternative and community media to understand how these practices build trust and communal care and foster solidarity;
- 2 researchers should share in the co-creation of knowledge with research participants so that participatory media projects can realise their democratic potential;
- 3 media practitioners seeking to challenge dominant media representations of race, class, gender, religion, citizenship status and sexual orientation should utilise the affective nature of personal stories and connect them with collective experiences;
- 4 filmmakers and community organisers should thoroughly research the topics and themes raised in their films so that they can engage in thoughtful conversations following public screenings of the films.

As documentary filmmakers and media researchers respond to grant-writing agencies by measuring impact via quantitative metrics, such as views and social media shares, I argue for persistence and patience with long-tail, multifaceted approaches to community media distribution. Broadcasting films on public television, exhibiting documentaries at film festivals and posting media open-access online are all viable distribution strategies for independent filmmakers and community media makers. Media production and film screenings pose exciting opportunities for educators, researchers and media practitioners to engage youth and their communities in critical literacies and radical pedagogies that have the potential to foster dialogues with current and future allies, and to script solidarity.

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Notes

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- ¹ Research methodology with community organisations, marginalised populations and social movements has been defined as community-based research (CBR); participatory action research (PAR); community-based participatory research (CBPR); and participatory video (PV), to name a few (Reason & Bradbury 2001; Rapoport et al., 2002; Minkler & Wallerstein 2008; Wallerstein & Duran 2010; White, 2003). Although this article is in conversation with this literature, I avoid describing this research with one of these methods because I view democratic theory as a method through which I conducted collaborative filmmaking and co-creative research.
- ² For filmmaker biographies, visit <https://www.youthdocumentary.org/filmmakers-showcase>.