Channels – Stories from the Niagara Frontier: A presentation by Prof. Ruth Meyerowitz (University @ Buffalo) and Dorothea Braemer (Squeaky Wheel/Buffalo Media Resources)

Channels is a production initiative started by Squeaky Wheel/Buffalo Media Resources (www.squeaky.org) which connects filmmakers with activist groups to make documentaries about issues that are significant to the region.

To date 16 videos have been produced, 4 each year for 4 years. Issues that he films are about range from prisoners rights, to native American boarding schools in the 1980’s, to poverty, housing, food issues.

The goal of Channels is to inform people about significant issues that are underreported by mainstream media.

For the grassroots groups that participate in Channels it is a tool to do outreach, mobilize people, and raise awareness.

For the filmmakers it is a chance to make films about social issues, have access to groups/issues that under other circumstances would take much longer to research, and receive equipment, support and a stipend while doing it.

The overall goal is to utilize film as an agent for social change. The idea was that the most effective way to use these films is through small screenings, with discussion.

How can media be used in the best possible way to affect social change? As you know, activist media can be boring and preachy, or it can also just be something that the already converted will watch. Channels is a way to address these issues.

We felt that the best way to use media to galvanize social change the following criteria had to be fulfilled:

1. The film should be short to leave room for discussion. Watching a film without discussion is not nearly as effective.
2. The film must be about issues, not about the organizations themselves. No fundraising film. Could be used for fundraising, but that should NOT be the purpose.
3. The group has to be fully committed to distribute the film. Have to submit a distribution plan as part of their application.
4. Filmmaker has to be willing to collaborate and care about social issues and Buffalo.
5. It is important that groups and filmmakers find and use their own authentic voices. We don’t want to guide them too much or tell them what to do.

Different styles of videos reveal different aesthetic choices and different modes of activist production. Watch videos: http://www.squeaky.org/channels

The discussion focused on three films:

You Are Where You Live by Vince Mistretta & Clean Air Coalition of WNY

Living in the Shadow of the Bridge by Mark Barner & Niagara Gateway Columbus Park Association/Buffalo West Side Environmental Defense Fund

'Round the Clock: Buffalo Workers and the Fight for Jobs with Justice by Christine Zinni & Coalition for Economic Justice