1982

An Independent with the Networks

Robert Drew
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This contents is available in Studies in Visual Communication: https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol8/iss1/4
I have been asked to write about myself and two questions: How do I happen to make documentary films the networks seem willing to broadcast? What role do I play as executive producer of Drew Associates films?

Robert L. Drew, chief filmmaker of Drew Associates, is a former fighter pilot and Life editor. As a Nieman Fellow at Harvard (1955) he worked out theories for a television journalism based on storytelling through candid photography. In 1960 he formed Drew Associates and conceived, produced, and managed the editing of Primary, the first film in which sound cameras moved freely with characters throughout a breaking story. Drew films (126 by 1981) are broadcast as network specials, winning Emmys and festival recognition for their spontaneity and humanity.
An Independent

About myself, I was a high school student in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, when I ran into a kind of music man. He stomped on the floor to beat time, smoked powerful cigars, and taught music by shouting into your face. His name was McKenna and he had a temper. He drove me to practice the trumpet a lot over a period of years. He also led the band and made good music.

What that got me when I left for the Army Air Corps was an appreciation of fresh air and a lot of bugle playing. I graduated from flying school on my nineteenth birthday. On my twentieth I was taking a long walk through occupied Italy after my last mission as a fighter pilot.

Back in California, I flew the first U.S. jet fighters, and wrote a story about that for Life magazine. I spent the next 10 years as a Life correspondent and editor in Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, and Chicago.

As for my role as an executive producer, it began in 1954, the year I had an idea about television. Television was reaching more and more people, but its documentary films were not reaching me. However interesting I might find the subject matter, I dozed off in the middle of documentary programs.

Why that had to be I could not imagine. My job was covering the real world and I found it exciting. Every few days I would go out with the likes of Alfred Eisenstaedt, Leonard McCombe, or Eugene Smith to bring back still pictures of reality that captured excitement, spontaneity, and, sometimes, even emotion.

The idea was no very great leap. It simply occurred to me to go after some of the qualities in motion pictures that we were already getting in still pictures. But it was an idea that could grow on you. For instance, if one made a more interesting documentary, one might interest larger audiences and inform viewers on levels that journalism had not reached before. Such storytelling might pay for itself, develop its own independence, and improve the lot of journalism, television, and the public.

Because the changes I had in mind were so simple and the steps to make them so obvious, I decided to take a few months off and do them myself. Life gave me leave. NBC gave me the money to make a magazine of the air. I put Life photographer Alan Grant behind the main camera and set off to cover a half-dozen stories.

The crew was not immediately enthusiastic, I think because wrestling with the big, blimped camera, the oak-hewn tripod, a table-sized 16-mm tape recorder, movie lights, and trunks full of cables had diverted their attention from the finer things in filmmaking. Spontaneously didn't wait around for all this stuff to be set up, and the only real surprises that took place in front of the camera were the shock of the clap sticks and outbursts of the sound man shouting "Cut!"

I found that an operation like this had to be planned and directed, and I directed it. I edited the film, wrote a narration, and delivered to NBC a magazine show under two different titles—Key Picture and, naturally, Magazine X. NBC professed to like the program and set off to try to sell a series based on it. I retreated to Life to try to figure out what had gone wrong.

After a few months I thought I had figured out most of the answers. Yes, we could get more talent into the process. Yes, we could reduce the size and complexity of the equipment, given money and time—maybe a million dollars and 3 or 4 years. Add a year or so at the front end to raise the money and a couple of years at the tail to make some breakthrough films and my simple fix had grown from a project of a few months to maybe 6 or 8 years.

That's how you get hooked. I was pretty committed by now, and I had a terrible feeling that one problem remained for which there might not be a solution. Grant and I had done some good things. But the film we turned out was not measurably better than some other documentary films. The things we had done were really not that important to the overall power of the film. Something was wrong that photography and writing did not remedy. As we tracked it down, the problem appeared to be the editing, the way we put the pictures together. On one level they made perfect sense, but on another they didn't build power. Until we got a line on that problem I feared that other improvements might not make the big difference I was after.

For clues I looked to Walter Lippmann, William Allen White, John Grierson, Henry Adams, Robert Flaherty, Josiah Royce, George Bernard Shaw. Josiah Royce? Yes, he was a philosopher, a contemporary of William James, and he wrote one book for laymen, The Philosophy of Loyalty. Royce had an inflammatory impact on me, not because he offered an answer, but because he offered an injunction: "Plunge ahead!"

I went off to Harvard on a NEA fellowship and spent the year on basic storytelling—the short story, modern stage play, novel. I wish I could tell you just how the answer grew on me over the course of that year, the realization of exactly what was wrong with the editorial thinking behind Key Picture and much other documentary filmmaking. The hints came from many sides and built up slowly until the answer seemed to me convincing and, yes, simple. It was so simple that I was embarrassed at the time it had cost me to realize it.
I am sure it is all perfectly clear to you today, but here is what I finally saw. Most documentary films were in fact lectures. They were then, and most remain today, lectures with picture illustrations. It was as clear as the lectures I was attending every day at Harvard and thrown into relief by the novels and plays I was reading every night. In television documentaries the logic was in the words, the narration, the lecture.

I tuned in to watch Murrow’s See It Now. As the program progressed, I turned off the sound and watched the picture. The progression disintegrated. What power had been there turned to confusion. The logic left. When I turned the picture off and listened to the sound, the program tracked perfectly. Later that year Murrow’s television programs were printed in book form. They read very well.

Obvious as all this must seem to you, it was staggering news to me. It made many things clear.

A lecture on the living medium of television must be dull. The apparent exception is when the lecture contains news, but then it is the news that sustains, not the lecture.

A lecture can promise a great deal. But the level of excitement it can deliver over a television hour cannot build. At best it remains flat. Even in a very good lecture, the curve of interest will generally droop.

The kind of logic that does build interest and feeling on television is the logic of drama. Dramatic logic works because the viewer is seeing for himself and there is suspense. The viewer can become interested in characters. Characters develop. Things happen. Whether the drama is a movie or a football game or a well-made play, the viewer is allowed to use his senses as well as his thoughts, his emotions as well as his mind. Dramatic logic may build power on a curve that has the possibility at least of going right through the roof. When this works, it puts viewers more in touch with the world, in touch with themselves and revelations about events, people, and ideas.

By this time, later in the Nieman year, the storytelling problem was beginning to sort itself out. Candid photography would capture the spontaneous character and drama that make the real world exciting. Editing would use dramatic logic to convey the excitement of the natural drama captured by the camera.

The other Nieman Fellows, all of them newspaper people, were not shy about offering me a challenge now and then, usually an alcoholic challenge as well as an intellectual one. I wondered what would give first, my liver or my brain, as we debated over martinis into the night the question of what, if anything, all this stuff about storytelling had to do with journalism.

Whatever the damage, I came out of the experience having considered some questions about knowledge, journalism, and storytelling.

Henry Adams lived through perhaps the most dramatic of the knowledge explosions. When he went off to college in the mid-1800s, it was expected that he would learn all there was to know. By the time he finished The Education of Henry Adams in 1904 diversities in knowledge were so great that he believed any sense of unity to be impossible. But, he said, I am old, and it may be that as I die a baby will be born who will grow up to believe that he can see the unity of it all. Unity, like beauty, may be in the mind of the beholder.

By 1955 Walter Lippmann had applied Henry Adams’ pessimism to American politics. Democracy cannot continue to function, said Lippmann, because the electorate can no longer know enough facts to vote rationally. Newspapers are declining. Television is leading us down the path of diversion and escapism. Knowledge is exploding, and nothing can make up for our not being able to keep up with it.

Such pessimism did not impress John Grierson at all. He agreed that no voter could know enough to vote rationally, but, he said, we’ve never made our decisions that way anyhow. It is “commonly shared experience” that has allowed us to make decisions together in the past.

But Grierson agreed with Lippmann that we do have a problem. Nations have become too large and complex to function as tribes, towns, or courts, or what the founding fathers had in the past. Grierson had a plan to fix all that.

All we need to do, he said, is build multitudes of theaters across the landscape, put films about the real world into them, and persuade whole populations to go to those theaters. Thus would Grierson use technology and filmmaking to give the millions the commonly shared experience necessary to the workings of their democracies.

I couldn’t help taking Grierson’s side because I recognized a certain kindred megalomania there and also because I had seen his improbable theater actually materialize. I had one in my living room. Television had gone Grierson one better, and now what were we going to do about it?

Journalists have problems deciding what to do with television because most good ones are captive of the medium in which they learned their trade. Thus an Indian smoke signalist might fail to appreciate the possibilities of the telegraph key. A radio reporter might have trouble showing things instead of telling them. A lecturer might have trouble allowing a drama to unfold.

But journalism is not one medium or another. It is a function that combines what is going on (news) with the means to communicate it.
Each means of communication survives by doing what it can do uniquely and best. Thus the New York Times does not try to print Life's pictures. Nor does Life try to print all the facts. Try to do what some other medium does uniquely better and you are mis-using your medium.

In television the nightly newscast is its own medium. What it does uniquely and best is summarize the news. Thus it calls for talkers to tell you many things quickly—a lecture with picture illustration that works because of its timeliness.

The prime-time documentary is a different medium altogether. What it can add to the journalistic spectrum is something absolutely unique—strong experience of what it is like to be somewhere else, seeing for yourself into dramatic developments in the lives of people caught up in stories of importance.

To address the question raised by my fellow Neiman, all this storytelling stuff has to do with creating a new television journalism that will bring the documentary into action doing what it can do uniquely and best. This means leaving to other media what they best can do. So don't look for facts. Do be ready for some illuminating, high-voltage experience. And the print media should also be ready for floods of new and interested readers. The right kind of documentary programming will raise more interest than it can satisfy, more questions that it should try to answer. It should create interests to fuel a multimedia engine for informing, a system for knowing that leads from television to newspapers to books.

That is how the year went. At the end I wrote a piece on some of these things for Neiman Reports called "See It Then."

I went back to Life hoping to quickly assemble my teams and engineer the lightweight equipment. But I found myself running in place to try to keep up with writing and editing chores. The managers of Time Inc.—Henry Luce, Roy Larsen—had looked at Key Picture and passed. Networks kept offering me jobs. I already had one of those. I was making $13,000 a year, and I needed a million dollars.

I was getting inspiration and sometimes help from a number of talented people: Richard Leacock, cameraman and filmmaker on a remarkable film for Omnibus, "Toby in the Tall Corn"; Arthur Zegart, a producer of CBS documentaries; Bill McClure, a cameraman for CBS Reports; Morris Engel and Fons Janelli, experimenters with mobile equipment and filmmaking.

It took me 5 more years before I had the team, the lightweight equipment, and the story for a breakthrough film. In the meantime I had made a number of short films financed by Andrew Heiskell, the publisher of Life. Bullfighters in Spain, experiments with weightless men, a balloon flight to look at Mars through a telescope above most of the atmosphere, a college football game—each of these was the subject of a Life story and also a short film by me. The films were picked up and broadcast on network television by the Today and Tonight shows, between variety acts on the Ed Sullivan show and on network news programs. Life got its money back in promotion. I got to exercise my teams and develop techniques. But we did not yet have our lightweight equipment, and the films were only preparation for making the candid dramas.

In 1960 I was invited to move from Life to Time's broadcast division. It owned television stations and had a terrific capital equipment budget.
Wes Tullen, vice president in charge of Time Inc.'s real estate and television operations, welcomed me aboard and asked me to teach the people in his stations "to make your kind of film." In return he would provide funds to buy and modify equipment and make my candid films.

To carry out my side of the bargain I commissioned a West Coast equipment maker, Loren Rider, to build a new machine that would allow us to edit complex films while mixing many sound tracks in any hotel room. It would be completely portable, and we could take it to any Time Inc. TV station, set up, and make our kind of films.

To engineer our lightweight cameras I asked Leacock to lay out the specifications, and we assigned D. A. Pennebaker, a filmmaker who once managed an electronics company, to translate these specifications to our equipment modifier, Mitch Bogdanovich.

By March 1960 I felt I was ready to make the first really candid film in which the camera-recorder would live intimately with characters involved in a real story.

I settled on a young senator, John F. Kennedy, running for President in a Wisconsin primary against another senator, Hubert Humphrey. I told both Senators that for this new form of reporting to work we would have to live with them from morning to night, shooting anything we wanted to shoot, day after day.

They could not know or care when we were shooting, and that was the only way we could capture a true picture of the story. When Kennedy raised an eyebrow I said, "Trust us or it cannot be done." Kennedy agreed. Humphrey agreed.

To shoot the film Primary I assembled three teams in Minneapolis. Each was composed of a photographer and a correspondent who also took sound. I assigned Leacock with myself as correspondent to Kennedy and photographers Al Maysles and Terrence McCarty Filgiate to swing between coverage of Humphrey and political gatherings. Pennebaker was there on his way to set up the new, portable editing machine in a Minneapolis hotel room.

It was 6 years since Key Picture, 5 years since Leacock and I had met, 4 years since we had begun preparing, and now we felt the excitement of a beginning about to begin.

On our first day with Kennedy, Leacock and I were riding in the candidate's car when it stopped in a small town. Kennedy bounded out, down a sidewalk, into a doorway, through a hall, and into a photographer's studio. The photographer posed Kennedy and took his picture, and Kennedy walked back out to his car. Leacock had never stopped shooting; I had never stopped recording. Now we looked at each other. It was a thrilling moment—the first time we had ever exercised such mobility in sync sound—maybe the first time anyone had.

We shot for most of a week. I gathered the teams every night to trade notes on what we had shot and make assignments for the next day. Two dramatic lines unfolded—Kennedy lightening to overcome the prejudices against a Catholic candidate. Humphrey warning the farmers against "Easterners who laugh at you." We followed those lines down to the night of the election. Kennedy was holed up in his hotel suite, and he had agreed that one of us would be there shooting. But Leacock was down in the coffee shop, reluctant to intrude on Kennedy's privacy. A laudable, decent fellow, this Leacock, I thought, as I walked him to the door and saw him into Kennedy's room. Leacock dropped midgetape recorders in a few ashtrays and shot what happened as Kennedy first appeared to be losing, then came from behind to win.

We arrived in Minneapolis with 40,000 feet of film. The door opened to the hotel room in which Pennebaker and Ryder had set up our new, portable editing machine. It was the size of a ballroom and full of machines and cables. "Don't worry," Pennebaker said, "we've wired the fuses." The thing was a monster. We worked around the clock to get it working and to synchronize the film and tape. There had been an invisible break in the wire Leacock and I had struggled so hard to maintain between his camera and my recorder. There was no sync signal. The film and tape would not match up. But Ryder had included a new gadget in his system. He called it a resolver, and all we had to do was turn the crank at the right rate in the right direction and we could transfer the sound in sync. The rates and directions changed constantly, and each piece took hours to bring into sync. Pretty soon we did not know whether it was day or night.

The people from the Time Inc. station would look in on us as they arrived for work in the morning and again as they left after work in the evening. They never showed the slightest interest in learning to make films our way.

This was the year I decided that photographers and correspondents must also edit. This would give them responsibility for paying off on what they shot and help each one of them develop as a "film-maker"—a person capable of going beyond his or her specialty to also produce and manage the editing of films.

In this hotel room my theory ran into the first of the considerable problems it was to trigger over the next few years. Al Maysles was a brilliant cameraman, but there was something about sitting at an editing table hour after hour that immobilized him. Filgiate, notorious for a corrosive wit, became positively ferocious after a few days and nights staring into a viewer.
The editing soon boiled down to Leacock, Penne-baker, and me. We schemed out sequences together. They cut them long. I cut them down. In the end I called in an editor from New York, Bob Farren, who combined the sequences. I gave the film a final pacing and wrote a spare narration. The film ran 58 minutes. Later Leacock reduced this to 30 minutes for air.

*Primary* seemed at that moment like a culmination. It was only a beginning. One thing it began was a period of furious production by an independent who was about to encounter the networks.

**With the Networks**

Independent documentary filmmakers have tended to regard the networks as huge, hostile, and indestructible. Yet the networks’ actual output of documentaries has been limited in number and style, and many independents will probably survive the networks very nicely.

Not all networks have been hostile all the time. ABC has used or accepted outsiders from time to time—myself, David Wolper, the Raymonds. NBC has accepted some documentary making when it came through the entertainment side (the *Life Line* series), and it has employed or bought from independents for particular jobs (John Alpert’s forays into Afghanistan and Cambodia). CBS has been more consistently closed to independents, though the entertainment division has been able to float documentary series such as *National Geographic* and *The Brady Bunch*. But some tough reasons for hostility have remained, reasons of pride, style, and overhead.

When *Primary* was ready to be screened in mid-1960, nearly all network documentaries were based strictly upon the written word. Narration carpeted almost every film, with spots left open for interview, all edited so that the word flow never ceased. *Primary* contained less than 3 minutes of narration. It showed characters in action, and it was meant to be looked at as one would look at a theatrical film.

*Primary*, 1960. (Drew Associates)
The reaction of network executives to Primary was summed up by my friend Elmer Lower, then an NBC News V.P. and later to become president of ABC News. "You've got some nice footage there, Dob."

The program was broadcast by station groups (Time Inc., RKO) and syndicated to local stations. It was never broadcast by a network.

Primary won the Hitchcock Award for Best Documentary and the Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival. In Europe Primary was received as a kind of documentary second-coming. It was broadcast on the television networks, won prizes, and made its way into theaters. Film critics in Paris rated it above the top fiction films of the year. My colleagues were lionized by the Europeans, and New Wave directors paid us the compliment of sending back our camera style in fiction films such as Breathless and Tom Jones.

After Primary things began to happen on the network front. I made a film on Indianapolis race driver Eddie Sachs, On the Pole. The vice president in charge of programming at ABC, Tom Moore, had been watching the evolution of our films. He showed On the Pole to his chairman, Leonard Goldenson, and came back to me with our first network proposition.

Edward R. Murrow had just gathered a lot of credit for several documentaries on Africa. Moore wanted me to make a program for ABC on Latin America.

I protested that television journalism should be making films on people. I suggested we let Murrow have the continents and that we do something else.

"What else?" asked Moore.

I took a week to puzzle out what else in regard to Latin America and came up with a story that could be seen through people in conflict who represented the nations, factions, and ideas that were clashing there. Moore commissioned it, I shot and edited it with my team in a hurry, and the program, Yanky No!, was broadcast in the fall of 1960. It made a splash with critics and the public. ABC's News vice president quit because his management had made the film with an independent. The sponsor, Bell and Howell, asked for more.

So the first network deal I made was for a single program on Latin America. It came about on the network's initiative because its chairman had a need his organization could not fulfill. We were selected because we were there at the right time with something promising to show. What we made for the network attracted commercial demand from a sponsor. That cemented a major arrangement between this independent and that network with Time Inc. as a profit-taking financial partner.

The arrangement called for me to produce programs in volume. I had never done that, but it fitted my theories. To build audiences big enough to pay for our programs and develop our independence we would have to broadcast the programming in a regular pattern. To do that we would have to produce in volume—perhaps 2 or 3 dozen hours a year. My theory called for most of those hours to be multisubject programs (magazine shows). I believed that we were selling "an experience," not "subject matter." But the network, sponsor, and Time Inc. wanted hours devoted to particular subjects, and that is what we were assigned to produce.

So far I had pretty much hand-made the programs one by one. But my theories called for training specialists who showed a talent for producing—cameramen, journalists, editors, writers—to conceive the films, manage the shooting, and "make" them in the editing. I called them "filmmakers" and began crediting at least one person as filmmaker on every production.

With Time Inc.'s help, I formed Drew Associates and saw that it was owned by the key, creative "Associates." I set up a research staff to find stories. I developed the concept of each program with a filmmaker and sent him or her off to shoot the story.

When the film came back, the whole production team would screen it, the filmmaker would present his "scheme" for editing it, and usually a free-for-all would ensue among the team members. Out of this I would adjudicate or, if necessary, compose a final scheme for the editing. The filmmaker would go off with the scheme, the raw film, and a half-dozen or so editors to make his first cut. A month or two later, I would see that cut and either approve it or reject it. Once or twice I was able to approve a cut. Mainly I found myself deep in the editing business. This was hurtful to filmmakers' pride, and I regretted it, but conceived it to be part of a necessary training process. In later years I have come to believe that the theory was wrong. It is true that a number of fine filmmakers have emerged. The first generation included Richard Leacock, Gregory Shuker, Don Alan Pennebaker, Hope Ryder, and James Lipscomb. Mike Jackson, Nick Proferes, Tom Bywaters, and Anne Drew rose from the ranks of editors. From the correspondents came Tom Johnson and Harry Moses. From the production side came Peter Powell, Phil Burton, and Sidney Reichman. I am now persuaded, however, that a great photographer does not have to be a total filmmaker and that anyone who sets himself up to make himself one may be defying the laws of art and nature.

Thus, in the first season with ABC, Drew Associates produced a half-dozen Closeups for Bell and Howell, broadcast at irregular intervals by ABC.

Time Inc. and ABC were giants who competed. They both owned television stations. ABC "stole" a Time Inc. station. A Time Inc. executive insulted ABC's president. Time Inc. lost its access to ABC air time.
Against my feverish advice, Time Inc. placed a multimillion dollar order with Drew Associates for a dozen new programs. I could see disaster for Time Inc.'s pocketbook and my whole editorial idea if I produced a revolution on film that could not find its way to the public via regular scheduling on network.

Time Inc. ordered the programs. I produced them. They were syndicated at odd times in odd places. The film festivals loved our programs, but they built no television audience. Time Inc. finally had to release Drew Associates from what had been an exclusive contract.

This move set up Drew Associates' first direct network deal. We were shooting on speculation a film on President John Kennedy in the White House, working with his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to counter the governor of the state of Alabama, who was trying to prevent black students from attending the state university.

Tom Moore called to say that ABC would like to buy the program. That was nice because we had just run out of money and I was about to call back our teams, call off the film, and, in fact, call off the company.

ABC sold the film, *Crisis, Behind a Presidential Commitment*, to Xerox, and we negotiated a 2-year arrangement by which Drew Associates would produce six documentary specials for ABC News.

The day after the deal was signed, a new ABC News president arrived to take over his duties—it was Elmer Lower. We had a nice lunch at Tavern on the Green. He made me an offer, "Tear up the contract," he said. "Bring your people aboard as a unit of ABC News and you can make films as long as you like." There was a pause. "If you insist on remaining independent, these will be the last films you make for us."

For 2 years it was quite clear that we were "independent." We made films on Vietnam and Malaya and the death of President Kennedy, but Elmer and I didn’t see too much of each other. The end of that period, 1964, was the end of our production for ABC News.

In 1965, Xerox asked me what subjects were too tough for networks to assign. I gave them a two-page list. They assigned an hour on drug addiction. The film, *Storm Signal*, won a first prize at Venice, but it was rejected by every network. Xerox bought time on stations in the top 50 markets, ran the film several times in each and got back figures proving that it was the most looked-at documentary of the year and ranked among the top ten specials of any kind.

In 1967, The Bell Telephone Company decided to commission a series of documentaries on the arts. The first year I produced three specials: Gian Carlo Menotti's "Festival of Two Worlds," the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House, and a jazz festival in Belgium with Benny Goodman. The programs were broadcast as specials on NBC and won all kinds of prizes including a Peabody Award.

The second year The Bell Telephone Company asked me to produce all their specials—an over dozen. For the first time in my life, I turned down business. I agreed to produce half of the hours, six, and suggested they stick with their original producer, Henry Jaffee, for the other six. I felt I owed Jaffee something because he had brought me together with Bell, but also I wanted more time for hand making the films. One of the programs, *Man Who Dances*, on ballet dancer Edward Villella, won an Emmy.

It was now 1969. Looking back, some interesting things had happened that had influenced relations between this independent and the networks. The one network that had known it could use independents now had a News president who felt that he didn’t want any. This closed down our access to public affairs subject matter for network broadcast.

The sponsors who had influenced networks to go after special qualities in documentaries were fading. Bell and Howell and Xerox and other companies had shifted into a less active and more conservative mode of broadcasting. As the costs of network hours increased, fewer sponsors could afford to buy whole programs. The networks gained strength as a buyers' market became a sellers’ market. They became less responsive to sponsors' wishes. As network competition for audiences increased, culture disappeared as a regular commodity in prime time. The Bell Telephone Company was denied air time for a continua-
tion of its series. At the same time, a kind of program was becoming fashionable that appeared to be a documentary but entailed none of the risk of dealing with the current real world—the Cousteau Undersea Series and the National Geographic Series. Finally, the cost of film increased, making it so costly to shoot real life uncontrolled that for me it became nearly impossible to continue to make really candid films. A lot of imitations appeared that tarnished a name that had been applied to our films in Europe, cinéma vérité. Thus came about simultaneously a network freeze and an economic hold on development of the ideas on which we had been making some progress. For me, the 1970s became what the 1960s seem to be becoming for television in general, a move to more specialized audiences. This was a bit hair-raising and exciting, and demanded new combinations of filmmaking and technology. In science, we made a series of films for NASA on planets, Mars, astronauts, and extraterrestrial life. In the arts, we made films on dance, opera, mime, and the struggles of young artists as they tried to make careers. In government, we made a series of films on how a state, Pennsylvania, tried to manage its most pressing problems. For corporations, we made films on corporate mergers, computers, Tall Ships, the Bicentennial, and Einstein (LTV, IBM, Portec, Westinghouse, Mutual Benefit Life). For a number of those corporations, we also made commercials—our major representation on network television being minidocumentaries running 30 seconds to 3 minutes. We also made political films for Nelson Rockefeller and a feature-length film for theaters on soaring.

Our network relations were at a standstill as the 70s brought on the blossoming of a multisubject hour in the form of the CBS 60 Minutes and later magazine shows at NBC and ABC. These shows frustrated me because I was not producing them, because they were still relying mostly on word logic, and because I thought I knew how they could be better done.

In 1979, I proposed a 1-hour special to NBC that wound up as an assignment to produce a shorter film for the NBC Magazine show. As he was beginning to make the assignment, Paul Friedman, executive producer of the show, said, "Wait a minute, I'm not sure I can do this." He disappeared down the hall and came back, "Yep, I can do it," he said. This magazine show, it appeared, could do what it wanted with independents.

Over the next 2 years, I produced a half-dozen pieces for the NBC Magazine show, half of them on videotape. This gave me a view on videotape and on some of the problems and prospects of the current Magazine shows.

I believe Magazine shows should provide opportunities for independents to work with networks. Those opportunities will entail some frustration because the Magazine show styles that are working with audiences provide an odd pattern for any broad-ranging or deeply felt journalism. 60 Minutes entrapment journalism is no way to try to look at the world in general. Nor is 20/20’s talky consort with show-business celebrities. NBC I regard as not frozen into a pattern because it has not yet been successful in attracting an audience.

On the subject of videotape, I expect to see a more powerful, experience-based journalism appear when we marry the journalistic ideas on which we have been working to tape. By removing the cost barrier posed by film, tape is freeing us to shoot candidly in ways that we have never been able to do before. I am determined that we will produce the new material in volume, program it regularly, and engage larger audiences with a true, broad-ranging form of real-life reporting.

I hope the networks, the public television network included, remain intact. We need ways of assembling audiences. The many alternative ways of broadcasting that seem headed our way promise to fragment audiences. I think our purposes could be more allied than against the networks.

But if I am wrong, one thing appears clear: the networks will be outlasted by independents who have learned to flourish in other environments.